

**The Foundations of Hope: An Examination of Christian Realism as the Basis  
for Hope in the Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr**

by

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## **DECLARATION**

1 August 2008

I, John Kenneth Burk, hereby declare that I have written this thesis and that the work done here is entirely my own.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Arriving at the stage of thesis submission comes at the end of a theological education that began many years ago in Waco, Texas. As anyone who has been through this process knows, the debts to others that have been accrued along the way are too great to be duly acknowledged in a short space, which is unfortunate because this may be the solitary page read in this thesis by those to whom I am most indebted. Nevertheless, some words of gratitude are fitting.

Dr. Mike Purcell's patient advisement, insightful commentary and helpful notations on the work submitted to him over these last three years have been invaluable. I appreciate the ways he has assisted in shaping and developing this thesis with a combination of rigorous questioning and unwearied graciousness. Plus, he referred to me as "Martha" whenever I worried too much over the innumerable minutiae that attend to the writing of a doctoral thesis, which was peculiarly helpful.

I am also particularly and uniquely grateful for the overwhelming support Margaret and I have received from my parents, who know well the paths trod to and through doctoral research. They have met us at all turns with encouraging words and support of every means imaginable. Our time in Edinburgh surely would not have been a reality without them.

The number of miles Margaret and I have wandered from Texas has grown precipitously over the past few years of our marriage—"young vagabonds", to be sure—during which time there have been both extraordinary and mundane developments in the lives of our families. Though we have not, by necessity, been present for the majority of these events, we have continued to receive support and encouragement from afar, and we are looking forward to the day when we purchase one-way tickets home.

There were certain things I expected from my time at the University of Edinburgh, but one of those was not the camaraderie found in Semples. Adam, Adrian, Chris and Todd have individually and collectively added to my life in Scotland, and for that I am most grateful. Conversations, competitions, weekly basketball games, dinners, lunches, Snickers runs, obscure references to "Fletch", and countless other activities are among the things I will first recall when I "tell the story" of Semples. It is no small testament to your friendship that I had to move home to complete the writing of this thesis, which I am convinced would have been finished long ago if it were not for you all. Thank you.

My study of Christian realism began over five years ago when I was introduced to Robin Lovin's work on Niebuhr. Many have advised and mentored me during my academic development since that time. Anything of worth found in the following pages is certainly due to the guidance I have received, while all errors or misjudgements are entirely my own.

A special word of acknowledgement is reserved for two people. Oliver, who was born (appropriately, I think) as I was completing the writing on hope toward the end of the thesis, has in his brief life already added a dimension of depth and meaning to ours that we cannot comprehend.

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*"Someday, girl, I don't know when, we're gonna get to that place that we really want to go and we'll walk in the sun, but 'til then..."*

## **ABSTRACT**

The theological virtue of hope is rarely associated with Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Realism, which was developed in during the twentieth century's world conflicts. Because of their carefully constructed analyses of the problems of human sin, their understanding of God and the human and their interpretation of the place of Christian ethics in the midst of a chaotic existence, Niebuhr's writings were indispensable to Christians of his time period. His profound influence on the fields of theology, ethics and Christian political thought has resulted in a revitalised interest in Niebuhrian realism in recent years. Most of this resurgent interest, however, has resulted chiefly in analysis of Niebuhr's political thought.

This doctoral thesis examines the philosophical and theological foundations of Niebuhr's Christian realism and finds in that examination a basis for associating theological hope with Niebuhr's thought. Attention is given primarily to Niebuhr's formal writings, where his theology is most sharply defined. The first part of the thesis considers the association between twentieth-century moral philosophy and Christian realism; Niebuhr's relationship to post-Vatican II Catholic moral theology; the social hermeneutics of Christian realism; and, a popular criticism of Niebuhr's realism from one of the leading intellectuals of postmodern theology today. From these investigations, we are able to discern particular philosophical themes that serve key roles for interpreting Niebuhr's realism.

Part two of the thesis explores how the themes determined in part one are carried over to help understand the basis of theological hope in Christian realism. Here the place of the "Christ of Faith" and the "Christ of History" are considered in light of previous investigations and placed within the context of Niebuhr's overall theology.

Having been served by the assistance of many interlocutors along the way, the thesis concludes that there is good reason to associate Niebuhr's articulation of Christian realism with theological hope. Though this is primarily a theological investigation, it will prove relevant for the new generation of Christian realists in present times.

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## **Part I: The Foundations of Christian Realism**

*We have all been expelled from the Garden, but the ones who suffer most in exile are those who are still permitted to dream of perfection.*

-Stanley Kunitz

From the preface to *The Collected Poems*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Kunitz, *The Collected Poems*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), n.p.

## Chapter One

### INTRODUCTION

#### *1.1 Introduction and Reasons for This Thesis*

Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) is a significant figure for the study of Christian ethics and the articulation he gave of Christian realism in the mid-twentieth century is still considered relevant in theology, ethics and politics. Niebuhr understood Christian realism to be a way of interpreting the realities of human existence in social and political contexts and of dealing frankly with the problems of sin and injustice found in those realities. Biographies, scholarly books, PhD theses—even stage plays<sup>2</sup>—that have been written about him both during his life and after his death attest to the influence and insight of Niebuhr's work.

There is still more that can be said about Niebuhr and Christian realism, and with a revitalised interest in his thought,<sup>3</sup> now is an appropriate time to do so. If this thesis can be summarised in one sentence it is that the foundation of Niebuhr's Christian realism provides a framework for a hopeful theological ethic. There are at least three reasons why such a thesis is important now: timeliness, the correction of misinterpretations of Niebuhr's realism and the cultivation of research in an unexplored area of Christian realism.

First, as suggested, there has been an upsurge of interest in Christian realism over the past decade or so which has given rise to the political writings dedicated to Niebuhr's interpretation of Christian realism. I am, however, not concerned in this thesis to account for the political voice Christian realism continues to gain. Where possible, I have tried to avoid overt political discussions as they relate to Christian realism or to Niebuhr's involvement in politics, both peripheral and direct. In some instances this has been difficult if for no other reason than Niebuhr's writings reflect his certainty of the obligation of Christian ethics to speak a word of meaning—

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<sup>2</sup> Ben Brantley, "The Eternal Vaudeville of the Spiritual Mind" in *The New York Times*, (June 6, 2007), <http://theater2.nytimes.com/2007/06/06/theater/reviews/06bran.html>

<sup>3</sup> For some of the recent work in this revitalization, see Robin W. Lovin, *Christian Realism and the New Realities*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Anatol Lieven and John Hulsman, *Ethical Realism: A Vision for America's Role in the World*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006); Peter Beinart, *The Good Fight: Why Liberals—and Only Liberals—Can Win the War on Terror and Make*

ultimate meaning—to our fractured, seemingly dystopic existences. But lately much has been written on the subject of Niebuhr and realist politics and the call to enter the fray is being well enough answered that I have chosen to leave that well enough alone.

Instead, I offer an account of some of the more foundational aspects of Niebuhr's realism, the comprehension of which is indispensable if we want to understand his realism in the first place. In a sense, this is a revisiting of some of the seminal work done in the 1990s on the fundamental theological and philosophical ideas in Niebuhr's work.<sup>4</sup> Here I am more concerned here to understand these fundamental ideas in light of some of the more recent postmodern critiques Niebuhr has received, and to put them in conversation with theologically hopeful enquiries.

Second, I am concerned to understand these foundational issues, in part, to offer a correction of those postmodern critiques. The resurgence of interest in Niebuhrian realism is simultaneously renewing criticism of it, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom. So far such criticisms in the UK have gone without much response—a deficiency worth correcting—because some of the criticisms have misinterpreted Niebuhr on the points they are criticising. This will be made clear later in the thesis.

Third, these foundational issues and responses to postmodern criticisms lead to the cultivation of a largely unexplored area in Niebuhr's thought: theological hope. Niebuhr is often associated with the so-called “hopeless” theologians of the mid-twentieth century because his stark analyses of human nature and the pervasiveness of sin lead him to the conclusion that humans have the ability to achieve only modicums of justice in a fallen world. The designation of “hopeless” is unfair, I think, particularly because there has been minimal work completed on the exploration of theological hope in Niebuhrian realism. Thus, in the chapters that follow, a fresh way to think about Niebuhr's realism is suggested. I am unconvinced that one need disregard stark analyses of the problems of human existence in order to maintain the confidence that though this world is “not as it ought to be”, we may still

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*America Great Again*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006); Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Just War Against Terror: The Burden of American Power in a Violent World*, (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Cf., Robin W. Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Langdon Gilkey, *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

hope in a final resolution that transcends our comprehension of it. Indeed, whence hope if not stark analyses of the human condition? For what would we be otherwise hoping if we were resigned to accept the imperfect order of our lives; or, if we were satisfied with the way things are? The polarity between hope and despair is great, but the intermediary alternatives are few. In an existence where Niebuhr rightly found few absolutes, one thing seems an unalterable given: we choose either hope or despair when we choose how to face the world we inhabit. If the principal feature of despair is resignation, then, in my reading of Niebuhr, it seems clear that Niebuhr chose the opposite in his application of Christian realism to the contexts in which we find ourselves.

There is also a note of both timelessness and timeliness in this focus on hope. Not only is hope one of the theological virtues championed in Paul's letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 13:13), but it is a virtue which is also recently gaining much attention. On one side of the globe, politicians and theologians alike assure us of the "audacity" of hope, while on the other, the most recent encyclical from Pope Benedict XVI entitled *Spe Salvi [facti sumus]* ("In hope we were saved"),<sup>5</sup> finds that hope and Christian faith are identical.

For these reasons—timeliness, reconsideration of criticisms and the presentation of fresh perspectives—I have chosen now to write on Niebuhrian realism and hope. The importance of this choice lies precisely in the fact that both Niebuhr and hope are receiving the amount of attention that they are, though they have until now to be considered jointly at great length.

### *1.2. Methodology*

The methodological approach of this thesis is straightforward. Ultimately this is a theological work, with the major theological themes addressed in the final chapters, after the foundational work is completed in the earlier chapters.

Part one of the thesis contains chapters two through five, all of which serve to introduce the major foundational themes of Christian realism and the ways in which they are incorporated into Niebuhr's interpretation of Christian realism. Part two,

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<sup>5</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, November 30, 2007, on the Vatican website: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20071130\\_spe-salvi\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi_en.html)

which contains chapters six and seven, is the place where the discussion of hope takes place, incorporating the ideas that were outlined in part one.

Chapter two introduces most of the terms that will be used throughout the remainder of the work. Its focus is primarily on the philosophical issues inherent to discussions about realism and the attendant ideas involved with Niebuhrian realism. As the sources used make clear, Christian realism and moral philosophy in the twentieth century are closely aligned. In this sense, chapter two is primarily an expansion on a conversation that is ongoing. Moreover, the link between moral philosophical ideas and the theological foundations of Christian realism has been established, but in order for the thesis fully to develop, the necessary supports must be put in place. In this way, chapter two serves as the plinth to the rest of the thesis.

Chapter three is a discussion about the relationship between the Catholic natural moral law tradition and Niebuhrian realism. This is a topic which received some modest attention both during and after Niebuhr's life. However, chapter three focuses more on the developments of post-Vatican II moral theology and the ways in which Niebuhr's realism finds consonance with them, a discussion that has not been sustained at any great length. Because Niebuhr's writings are frequently critical of Catholicism on the issue of its natural moral law tradition, the emphasis given to this discussion helps better to illuminate the foundational issues involved in the thesis.

Chapter four builds on the previous two chapters and places their foundational concerns within the broader context of social hermeneutics. In some ways, chapter three anticipates chapter five, but needs the necessary diversion through chapter four in order to make the connection. This is so because chapter four focuses on the methodology of Niebuhr's realism, paying particular attention to the viability of Christian ethics in social contexts today. This emphasis draws attention to the influence of existentialism on Niebuhr's realism, and conversation partners like William Schweiker are incorporated to help better understand the relevance of Niebuhrian realism in modern discourse.

Chapter five is reliant on the issues raised in the previous three chapters to address a criticism of Niebuhrian realism by John Milbank, one of the most prominent postmodern theologians writing today. Milbank, an architect of the theology of Radical Orthodoxy popularised in the United Kingdom, wrote an essay



in 1997 entitled “The Poverty of Niebuhrianism”. To date, this essay has gone without intensive response. Because the issues raised by Milbank are precisely related to the foundational concerns of chapters two through four, the inclusion of a response to his criticisms is a natural fit for the thesis. Primarily, Milbank is concerned that Niebuhr is too heavily reliant on a Stoic ethic which, Milbank thinks, prohibits Niebuhr’s realism from proffering a *truly* Christian ethic. This criticism, as seen in that chapter, indirectly raises the issue of how Niebuhr’s realism can be hopeful. This can be answered by suggesting that Milbank misreads Niebuhr on the issue of Stoicism and actually agrees with Niebuhr on the issue of evil, which leaves room for theological hopefulness.

Chapter six addresses the importance of Christology for Niebuhr (a topic left largely untouched in the study of Niebuhr’s thought) and relates one facet of theological hope to what I call the “essential” Christ. Hope takes on a particularly metaphysical character in this chapter, similar to the moral foundational issues found in the first part of the thesis.

Chapter seven then discusses the role of eschatology in shaping hope for Niebuhr. No theological discussion of hope is complete without the affiliated discussion of eschatology and, despite the fact that Niebuhr was so critical of what he considered an overemphasis on this kind of doctrine, the eschatology latent in his own, later theological works bears relevance for such a discussion. Additionally, Niebuhr’s Christology continues to be important as I discuss what is called the “existential” Christ in relation to realism’s eschatological hope. All of these chapters are summarised in the concluding chapter eight.

Before offering a brief history of research, two remarks are in order. First, Niebuhr is written about in the present tense. This is an acknowledgement of the fact that Niebuhr’s thoughts and ideas about Christian realism are still as important today as they were during the time that he wrote. As Roger Shinn perceptively noted in 1974, “To evaluate [Niebuhr’s] ideas in his presence was always to enter into dialogue with him, awaiting the next reply. His thought was vibrant enough that the dialogue will continue, in the sense that dialogue often continues with thinkers of the

past”.<sup>6</sup> The influence of Christian realism on social ethics and Niebuhr’s contribution to that influence continues to be recognised. If that is the case, it is important to signal deference to the intellectual predecessor who helped contribute to our understanding of what the possibilities for the Christian life are. The choice in tense is my small way of doing just that.

The second point worth mentioning is that there are many interlocutors aside from Niebuhr throughout this work; John Milbank, William Schweiker, Sabina Lovibond and Charles Matthews to name a few. These other voices help make the point that Niebuhr’s vision of Christian realism is not a fixed one. Interpreting the world realistically is an evolutionary process which requires a sense of justice that seeks to conform to the “law of love” of Christ, an imagination creative enough to “dream of perfection” in spite of our perennial failures and a disposition humble enough to “accept those things” which we cannot change. I am not interested only in being an apologist for Niebuhr’s realism, nor am I interested in finding the faults of Niebuhr for his interpretation of Christian realism. I am, however, interested in the renaissance of Christian realism and its reception. Any piece that results from that interest requires a foundation from which to build its understanding of Christian realism and a knowledge of the reception of Christian realism today. Consequently, I have chosen to put Niebuhr in conversation with both individuals and traditions. This, I think, affirms the ways in which Niebuhr’s realism shaped the mid-twentieth century and continues to do so today.

### *1.3. Previous Research*

The body of scholarship on Niebuhr is already expansive and still growing, as are the areas of focus for studies in Christian realism. But sustained work on the topic of hope in Niebuhr’s realism has yet to be completed. In terms of this thesis, the most important research that has been conducted is in the foundational areas of the first part of the thesis. Two seminal works are particularly important for those concerns. The first is Robin Lovin’s *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*. Lovin provides a helpful account of the philosophical and theological foundations of Niebuhr’s Christian realism and how those foundations give voice to the issues with which Niebuhr was most concerned, such as freedom and politics. It is Lovin’s book

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<sup>6</sup> Roger L. Shinn, “Realism, Radicalism and Eschatology in Reinhold Niebuhr: A Reassessment”, *The*

which gives the most systematic treatment to some of the ideas that are covered in chapter two here.

The second work is Langdon Gilkey's *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study*. Gilkey provides the most thorough account of Niebuhr's theology to date, and helpfully divides his enquiry into the early and mature periods of Niebuhr's life. A discursive approach is adopted instead in this thesis. This is primarily due to the fact that the issues covered in the thesis were influential for Niebuhr throughout the whole of his career; not in any one epoch. Though Niebuhr certainly gave them more clarity in his later writings, the foundational issues which influenced his understanding of Christian realism remained important throughout his career. Nevertheless, Gilkey's work is instrumental for understanding the theological issues involved in Niebuhr's realism.

There are obviously more works which are consulted, many at great length. But these two initially provided the motivation for my study in Christian realism in the first place, and they stimulated the ideas about hope and realism that are found in the following pages.

Having given an outline of what is to follow, there is little else to say in terms of an introduction. Let us, therefore, begin.



## Chapter Two

### THE FOUNDATIONS OF CHRISTIAN REALISM

#### *2.1. Abstract*

In the introductory chapter the terms were set for the framework which will be used throughout the duration of the project. One undertaking necessary for a successful completion of the task at hand is to outline the influence of moral philosophy on theological ethics and Reinhold Niebuhr's interpretation of Christian realism, which will be accomplished in this chapter. After offering a synopsis of some of the moral philosophical approaches to realism in the twentieth century, I will also discuss some other realist approaches to ethics. Following that, a discussion of the relationship between moral philosophy and theological ethics will be offered. Finally, two approaches in theological ethics representative of different ethical methodologies are considered in relation to the preceding discussion.

#### *2.2. Introducing Realism*

A realistic person is one who is colloquially thought of as a person who contemplates the realities (facts) of a particular state of affairs in his or her life and who attempts to deal frankly with the likeliest result of that state. For instance, if I tell you that I am trying to be "realistic" about the prognosis of my cancer, you will understand me to mean that I have considered the facts about my cancer, weighed the various possible outcomes associated with those facts and have resolved to deal as forthrightly as possible with whatever those facts portend for my future. This may mean that I realistically hope to recover from my cancer because my medical advisers have told me that the facts concerning my condition mean that there is a viable potential for the cancer to enter remission. This may also mean, however, that I have to deal with the fact of my death if I have been advised that the cancer will not enter remission. Such a disposition is as equally realistic as the first.

When we speak of a person as someone who is morally, theologically or philosophically realistic, we mean something not altogether dissimilar from our colloquial use of the word, though the distinctions are great and the nuances many. If one is considered a moral realist, that person is generally understood as one who, when faced with moral challenges, attempts to correct any injustices in his or her social contexts by pointing to a moral reality—a "good" of some sort—as a plumb

line which serves as a measure and balance for attempts to rectify the injustices perceived in the given situation. It is not, however, simple enough to say that a morally realistic person only observes the carnage of a moral shipwreck, points her moral compass to the good and charts a new journey which avoids the mistakes which led to the shipwreck in the first place. That is a moral fantasy disconnected from the realities which actually comprise moral enquiry. Human existence is not tidy enough to suggest that injustices are corrected simply by pointing to a good as a reality to which we can assent with a certain degree of moral reflection or a greater deal of moral sensitivity.<sup>1</sup>

The problems arise when we stop to consider the capacity of the moral agent to apprehend the nature of that moral status. If I am the agent, how do I know that I have rightly discerned the objective nature of good? How do I know how best to correct the injustices I face in my social context when I think I have discerned the good? Generally, moral realists answer that though we cannot with certainty know that we have either apprehended the good, or that we have properly assented to it, we must nevertheless act to correct those situations we know to be unjust, but we must act with the knowledge not only that we *may* be wrong in our present actions and judgments, but that we *have been* wrong previously and that we *will be* wrong again in the future. It is no exaggeration, then, to suggest that this crucial detail informs the basis of moral, theological and philosophical realisms, and it is a theme that will be reiterated frequently in the following pages. Thus, what is problematic with suggesting that injustices are corrected by appeals to some sort of autonomous moral principle is not the notion that the moral principle itself possesses an objective status.

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, using terms like the “good” in such a definitive sense is, by virtue of its ambiguity, a dangerous way to try to conduct moral dialogue. The concept of good—definitive or not—as a device for moral reflection has a tortuous history, effecting difficulty in defining what, precisely, is meant by its usage. However, moral dialogue cannot do otherwise than to offer a conception of what good is if it hopes to be useful dialogue. Even in the preceding sentence I have claimed good as both a “concept” and a “device”, which implicitly suggests that it is something both to be *assented to* and something to be *used*. I have made this suggestion deliberately because it relates to Niebuhrian understandings of the same term. In this and the chapters that follow, I will use the term “good” in the way I think that Niebuhr understands it, which is not essentially different from the way that moral realists use the term. That is to say that when Niebuhr speaks of the good—or, interchangeably, the “impossible ideal”—he does so understanding that it stands transcendently apart from human existence, but is immanently relevant for that existence. There will be more on that later. At present it is sufficient to note that Niebuhr characterises good in this way. For a generally useful introduction to the changes in the ways good has been understood in (Western) moral philosophy, see Alasdair MacIntyre’s *A Short History of Ethics: A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the Twentieth Century*, (London: Routledge, 1998), especially chapters 1-3.

As we will see in a moment, the central motif that separates realists from anti-realists is this: the claim that morality possesses an objective nature which subsists independently of what the moral agent thinks about it.

Emphasis on the objectivity of morality does not, however, restrict the essential relativity of moral judgment. Realists of any sort would agree that the judgments of the moral agent are susceptible to human error, and are thus relative in their very nature.<sup>2</sup> So to the “question asked about any moral rule or social practice... Is it part of the essentially local realm of...(convention or custom) or of the essentially universal realm of...(nature)?”, the moral realist answers Yes.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the moral agent affirms that: a) if  $x$  is the good, then  $x$  belongs to a reality independent of hers; b) nevertheless, though her reality is ultimately related to  $x$ , the meaning of  $x$  is determined by the customs and mores of particular communities in particular times, and her conceptions of  $x$  are based in those particularities; c) therefore, if the conventions and traditions of her community lead her to define something as  $x$ , one from a community with different conventions and traditions from hers will not necessarily agree with her assessment of  $x$ . Though there is room for disagreement on either side, either side may plausibly alter their opinions about  $x$  based on the persuasiveness of the other’s appeals. Either way, the realist affirms that  $x$  both exists independently of, and is related to the moral agent’s interpretation of  $x$ .<sup>4</sup> It is important to note, though, that for the Christian realist, this is not “to claim that we cannot judge things about Christianity at all—that we just have to take each local variety as we find it....It is to say that Christianity constitutes a world, a reality, a self-defining comprehensiveness that we have to stand within to understand on its own terms...”.<sup>5</sup> That is, Christianity provides an interpretive

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<sup>2</sup> They would hasten to add, though, that the moral agent does not *will* erroneous judgments, but that such error is a natural fact of human existence. Niebuhr’s emphasis on original sin makes this clear, as we will see in the section on post-Kantian radical evil in chapter five.

<sup>3</sup> McIntyre, pp. 10-11.

<sup>4</sup> Kant’s discussion of “practical laws” and “practical principles” makes a similar distinction. Practical laws are those objective laws which all (rational) people recognise and under which they live, while practical principles are subject to the individual’s “will”, guided by his or her desires. See Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Practical Reason, Part One: Doctrine of the elements of pure practical reason*, in Mary J. Gregor and Allen Wood (eds.), *Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 153-164.

<sup>5</sup> Sue Patterson, *Realist Christian Theology in a Postmodern Age*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 10.

framework for the realist, but any interpretation of a particular social context is subject to alteration when necessary.

Theological<sup>6</sup> and philosophical realists treat their respective subject matters similarly to the ways moral realists treat theirs. For the theological realist the considered subject is God, and “[s]tatements about God are not simply expressions of emotion or acts of personal commitment. Theological claims have cognitive content. They may be true or false. True statements about God are true because they accurately represent a reality independent of the concepts, theories, and evidence we have pertaining to that reality”.<sup>7</sup> In other words, one can say that there is an objective moral order made known and validated through the “concepts, theories, and evidence” we have for that order, and further claim that this moral order is ordered by God. This is either a universally true or false claim: if it is true, it is true for everyone; if it is false, it is false for everyone. But this claim, regardless of its veracity, does not demand from me any kind of personal commitment or emotional involvement. Note that this does not mean that claims about, or expressions related to, God are also not *only* cognitive statements; they can be a manifestation of personal or emotive commitments or appeals, though they do not have to be. The importance of Lovin’s statement is that these claims are not contingent on personal commitments or emotional expressions of the person making the statement. In fact, we might add that a realistic disposition about claims that involve some sort of personal commitment would be wariness vis-à-vis the possible prejudices associated with that claim.

Philosophical realism, on the other hand, explicitly does not rely on the same claims about reality that theological realism does. Philosophical realism claims an objective, independent reality that exists apart from human conceptions about it. However, this reality need not be contingent on causality for its origin. That is to say that while some theological realists argue in favour of a realism which understands the regulation of the universe as a divine ordering—natural law theorists could plausibly be included in this group—philosophical realism does not need the same causality to make its claims. Two things are significant about philosophical

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<sup>6</sup> For a helpful introduction to theological realism, see Peter Byrne, *God and Realism*, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), pp. 1-20.

<sup>7</sup> Robin W. Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, p. 20.



realism's claims regarding reality, as Michael Devitt has highlighted. First is the claim to reality's independence, or objectivity. "For the realist the material or physical world he believes in has to exist not only objectively but non-mentally".<sup>8</sup> This is nothing more than an ontological claim about an external reality which does little to satisfy our curiosity about *what* it is that we say exists when we say something exists independently.

This brings us to the second point. Devitt calls a realism that simply identifies an ontological claim (i.e., "reality exists objectively") "weak realism", and categorises it as problematic because it does not offer any basis of meaning for the universe due to the fact that "[i]t cannot play a role in explaining any phenomenon. It is an idle addition to idealism: anti-realism with a fig-leaf".<sup>9</sup> He suggests that weak realism can be remedied, albeit only slightly, if we acknowledge that "the world consists not just of *something* but of a structured set of entities".<sup>10</sup> What will bolster this claim more, though, is a "description of the world to which the realist is committed as that of common-sense physical or material objects; for example, stones, trees and cats". When realism is framed in these terms, "we make [it] much more specific by committing it to the existence of common-sense physical entities".<sup>11</sup> Now, it should be noted that Devitt suggests these modifications to the too-generalised definition of realism to scientific realism, which is itself a more specific version of philosophical realism. The modifications are useful to a point, but they may not be very convincing to the one still sceptical of moral realism. Scientific realists, demanding more specificity from the claims of a weak realism, can at the very least agree that some things (i.e., stones, trees and cats) are physical objects constitutive of the physical universe to which these objects belong. Of course, not all intellectual debts are cancelled by this account because while scientific realists may agree that certain objects are physical objects, they may plausibly disagree about the meaning or significance of those objects. "Scientists do not take the same epistemic attitude to all theories, even to the ones they 'accept'.

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Devitt, *Realism and Truth*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), pp. 13-14.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*. Italics mine.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*.

Attitudes range from strong belief, through mild belief and agnosticism, to outright disbelief'.<sup>12</sup>

Moral and theological realists, on the other hand, do not have at their disposal the same "common-sense" physical objects about which they can agree when they speak of morality and the nature of the good, or of God. Thus their provisos are not the same as that of a scientific realist when she speaks about external reality. Moral and theological realists may agree that external reality is related to the existence of good or of God, but they cannot expect any sort of consensus about what they are saying exists when they say these things exist objectively. Thus, moral and theological realists encounter an epistemological problem that is not as easily resolved as philosophical realism appears to be.

Acknowledging that moral and theological realists cannot support their claims to objectivity in the way that scientific realists do does not mean that we should prematurely discard any babies in murky epistemic bathwaters. What both moral and theological realists presuppose for objective order is a universe in which meaningfulness trumps meaninglessness. A meaningful universe is tied up in an order that is mind-independent of human existence, though related to it. This is a paradox within which Reinhold Niebuhr is comfortable living, precisely because he is both a theological and moral realist, and he presupposes a meaningful universe for theological and ethical reflection. "It is", as Niebuhr notes, "impossible to examine the details of the human picture without assuming a framework of meaning for the details".<sup>13</sup> The meaning of our lives is not synonymous with our existence itself, what Niebuhr calls the "natural process". So, "[t]here is in every individual life a depth or a height of meaning incongruous with the natural process".<sup>14</sup> In other words, some sense of order must be presupposed if meaning is to be determined.

Thus, the philosophical scientific realist stands in the park, calls a tree a tree and says that it is part of an external reality. But the moral realist will not be able to stand alongside, point to another object and call it good; nor will the theological realist be able to call some other object God. Both of these realists are dependent on

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History*, (London: Nisbet & Co., 1949), p. 75.

belief about the external reality to which they ascribe meaning, so that when they call something “good”, for example, they are appealing to a belief about an external authority from which they derive that particular thing’s goodness, not referring to the intrinsic qualities of the thing-in-itself.

Lovin thus rightly points out that claims about God are not simply expressions of personal commitment. But we might add that while our claims about the good or God are not only expressions of personal commitment, they are still inextricably related to personal belief. In this instance, Lovin’s point still stands. I can believe something to be true (i.e., “I believe God exists”) without being personally committed to any demands I might associate with this belief (i.e., “My belief in God’s existence compels me to give to the poor, but I do not commit myself to that enterprise”), though my moral reasonability ought to be questioned in this instance.<sup>15</sup> Beliefs still have cognitive content here, and the moral or theological realist who allows for belief in something must also allow for the possibility that her belief may be false.

As philosophical realists need not be committed to the same kind of objectivity of moral or theological realists (though their understandings of objectivity as a characteristic of existence-independence are similar), moral realists do not need to make the same kind of causal claims concerning God that theological realists do. As previously mentioned, the moral realist and the theological realist both rely on the notion that their respective claims about the good or about God are contingent upon beliefs about what kind of metaphysics are involved in those claims. But interpretations of these metaphysics can differ. Moral realists can believe in the objective nature of the good without being theistic in their claims about the good. Theological realists, on the other hand, tie their claims about the objectivity of the good to the claim that God exists objectively and independently from human conceptions. Any moral realism that understands the properties of moral goodness as existing objectively and naturally (ethical naturalism) is not countermanded by

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<sup>15</sup> In this case it may be right to suggest that the person who holds false beliefs, but acts in ways he or she believes are in accord with those beliefs may be more morally reasonable than the person who holds true beliefs but refuses any commitment derived from those beliefs. The former may be morally deranged or be a sociopath (David Koresh’s conclusion that because he was the messiah, he was committed to engaging in sexual acts with minors to promote his “kingdom” comes to mind in this case). The latter, however, may hold the capacity for moral reasonability, but simply be a liar.

theological realism; neither is theological realism countermanded by such a moral realism.<sup>16</sup>

We can summarise the preceding by saying that (and for the moment we use these terms generally): 1) All moral realists are philosophical realists. Indeed, moral realism *is* philosophical realism. 2) Not all moral realists are theological realists. 3) Not all philosophical realists are moral realists.<sup>17</sup> 4) Not all moral realists are theological realists. 5) All theological realists are (again, generally) in some sense moral realists. Niebuhr's understanding of Christian realism is most appropriately identified with the fifth statement.

The point to take away from this introduction is that we can understand these realisms in two ways. In the first instance, the object of any of the above mentioned realisms serves a descriptive function. So when the moral realist says, "x is good", he or she simply means to describe *what* the good is. In the second instance, the object of any of the realisms serves a prescriptive function. When the moral realist says something *about* the good, the statement is appealing to the good in a propositional fashion. Thus, when he or she says that feeding children nutritious meals is a good act, he or she will assume that any hearers of that statement will

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<sup>16</sup> It is difficult to make the claims of moral realism about good's objectivity without recourse to some explanation of whence the good comes, or what it demands of us. David Brink goes some way toward explaining how the moral realist—more specifically, the moral realist who is also an ethical naturalist (which we will discuss in the following section)—need not be a theological objectivist, or realist, but that the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive. He thinks of the theological objectivist as the one who argues that God exists and has ordered the universe in such a way that good exists objectively and makes certain moral claims on us; and, because they are put in order by God, they are God's moral demands on us. "[I]f moral properties, though actually constituted by natural properties, could have been realized by some properties that are not natural—say, by supernatural properties of a divine being—then moral properties are not necessarily natural properties. Though constituted by natural properties, moral properties, on this counterfactual assumption, cannot be identified with natural properties". Brink does not think this is necessarily the case. He continues in the footnote, "Of course, we shall not accept this counterfactual assumption, even though we agree that theism is possible, if we accept theological objectivism...For if theological objectivism is true, we will not think that moral properties consist in properties of divine will even in those worlds in which God exists and commands all and only morally correct actions. So ethical naturalism, construed (even) as an identity thesis, is not undermined by God's possible existence if theological objectivism is true". See David O. Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, (New York: Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 158. For an interesting account of a comparison between philosophical ethics which rely on theological conceptions of God and those which do not (though the comparison is not explicitly between realist accounts), see John E. Hare, *God and Morality: A Philosophical History*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> 'Philosophical realism' in these terms simply means that one holds a view of the universe that affirms that entities exist independently of human thought. What I mean when I suggest here that not all philosophical realists are moral realists is that one can affirm that entities exist independently of human conceptions about them without affirming that moral concepts (i.e., 'good', 'just', 'right' etc.) are part of those ideas.



understand what is being said, and will know that the good is not the acts themselves. If that were the case, one could plausibly argue that acting in a way that potentially harms a child is also a “good” act, insofar as one understands the goodness in acts as bound up in the acts themselves. The point in saying that feeding a child well is a good act is that the act is informed by the understanding of good as objective, and that it thus coheres with what is known to be good; a *telos*, or an end to which the act is directed.<sup>18</sup> Aristotle famously makes this point when he says

[i]f it is true that in the sphere of action there is an end which we wish for its own sake, and for the sake of which we wish everything else, and that we do not desire to act for the sake of something else (for, if that is so, the process will go on *ad infinitum*, and our desire will be idle and futile) it is clear that this will be the good or the supreme good.<sup>19</sup>

The good in this instance is in that end to which our moral acts aim. It is an incarnate good, rather than a simple ideal.

Realism is now generally outlined and we are prepared to consider moral realism more particularly. We will do this in the following section, and will subsequently devote time to considering some of the many nuances in moral realism, especially as they apply to Niebuhr’s articulation of Christian realism. Let us now turn our attention to these important distinctives in moral realism.

### 2.3. *Moral Realism*

Brief histories of ideas are difficult to write if only by virtue of the fact that culling selected parts of those histories and presenting them as the most important parts of those ideas can result in careless scholarship or uncritical generalisations. With those admonitions in mind, it is important to consider the history of moral realism in order better to understand the foundations with which Niebuhr’s Christian realism is identified. We will begin by retracing the developments in moral realism in the twentieth century. Important to this endeavour is a consideration of the major players involved in the debates surrounding moral realism and what those debates

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<sup>18</sup> As David Fergusson notes, “A tradition arises in part through a provisional consensus about how the goods sought in a wide variety of practices and institutions are to be ordered, and how they are to serve some overall *telos* of human life”. David Fergusson, *Community, Liberalism and Christian Ethics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 114.

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by J.E.C. Weldon, (Amherst, Prometheus Books, 1987), p. 10.

were about. From this we will be able to identify what the various kinds of moral realisms are, and those with which we should identify Niebuhr's understanding of Christian realism.

### 2.3.1. *Moral Realism in the Twentieth Century*

Realist thought has long been prevalent in the history of Western philosophy.<sup>20</sup> Even Plato's use of the "forms" in *The Republic* is in some sense a realist idea: the enlightened person discovers (through intellectual assent) that something objective exists behind the shadows cast on a cave wall, and that it exists independently of human conceptions about it. The shadows are simulacra of an independent reality (the sun), but they draw their meaning from that reality, making the reality "knowable", at least in part, to all people capable of observing the shadows (i.e., those who are not shackled in the cave). Realism's established presence in the history of philosophy notwithstanding, the most important timeframe for considering moral realism for present purposes is the early to mid-twentieth century because it was during this time that accounts of realism began significantly to be challenged by other, anti-realist accounts.

For example, the ideas associated with this moral realism received the most negative attention in the twentieth century due, perhaps, to the publication of G.E. Moore's 1903 publication of *Principia Ethica*. Here Moore attacks what he calls the "naturalistic fallacy", which he associates with philosophers who rely on some notion of objectivity for their thought. The problem Moore has with the idea of objectivity, particularly as it relates to ethics, is with the singularity associated with that idea. He notes that when we

[c]onsider yellow....We may try to define it, by describing its physical equivalent; we may state what kind of light-vibrations are not themselves what we mean by yellow. *They* are not what we perceive....

Yet a mistake of this simple kind has commonly been made about 'good.' It may be true that all things which are good are *also* something else, just as it is true that all things which are yellow produce a certain kind of vibration in the light. And it is a fact, that Ethics aims at discovering what are those other properties belonging

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<sup>20</sup> Geoffrey Sayre-McCord suggests that though realism is often disputed, it "involves embracing just two theses: (1) the claims in question, when literally construed, are literally true or false (cognitivism), and (2) some are literally true. Nothing more". Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, "Introduction: The Many Moral Realisms" in *Essays in Moral Realism*, edited by Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, (London: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 5.

to all things which are good. But far too many philosophers have thought that when they named those other properties they were actually defining good; that these properties, in fact, were simply not 'other,' but absolutely and entirely the same with goodness.<sup>21</sup>

In other words, it is insufficient to associate, as Moore thinks realism does, something like the objectivity of morality with certain natural features we can identify as intrinsic to the character of morality. Moore's attack on the "naturalistic fallacy" is what is considered representative of "ethical non-naturalism" at its strongest. We will momentarily give attention both to naturalism and non-naturalism. The point for now, however, is to stress the importance of Moore's work for the field of moral philosophy in the twentieth century. As a result of the publication of *Principia Ethica*, some of the more stalwart defences of moral realism ensued, giving it an appeal much greater than had before been associated with it.

Though by the turn of the twentieth century the kind of metaphysics important to methodologies for philosophies of ethics like moral realism had begun to fall out of favour in American and English contexts, metaphysical enquiries were still popular elsewhere, particularly in continental philosophy. Mary Warnock, in her history of ethics covering the first sixty years of the twentieth century, notes that

[s]ince 1900, both [in England] and in the United States, metaphysics has been virtually dead. The influence of Wittgenstein...opened the way for a much wider view of moral philosophy than was generally held at the beginning of the century....But on the continent a very different sort of moral philosophy has been flourishing...[s]ystem-building has not been discredited on the continent....Moral philosophy has taken a place as part of the general theory of man, of human nature and its place in the universe.<sup>22</sup>

Warnock thinks the loss of grand metaphysical schemes that attempt to answer questions about the meaning of history is a good thing, and she credits Moore as one of the chief demolishers of this system. It is not her point about the loss of metaphysics that is interesting for our purposes, though. What is interesting is Warnock's highlighting of continental philosophy's preservation of metaphysics, which is of greater importance for consideration of Niebuhr's Christian realism; for it was the kind of metaphysical enquiry Warnock thinks so beneficially absent from

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<sup>21</sup> G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, Rev. Ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 62.

twentieth century moral philosophy that energised Niebuhr's own understanding of Christian realism. This is perhaps most evident in the existentialist themes—prevalent in continental philosophy in the middle of the twentieth century—that Niebuhr picks up from his continental contemporaries like Nicolas Berdyaev and Jacques Maritain.<sup>23</sup> One sees the correlations between Niebuhr and these thinkers even in the titles of their respective works. For example, Berdyaev's *The Destiny of Man* predates by three years Niebuhr's second set of Gifford lectures by the same title. The respective works deal with many similar themes including moral epistemology, the problem of privative evil, human freedom, the end of history and the establishment of the kingdom of God.<sup>24</sup> Niebuhr's later *Faith and History* also picks up on these themes, particularly the paradox of human freedom and historical evil in classical and modern thought.<sup>25</sup>

Warnock's point that metaphysics absconded in the wake of the rising tides of British and American moral philosophies at the beginning of the twentieth century does not mean that metaphysics was lost altogether. Metaphysics is still important for understanding realism and there is a wide diversity about what those metaphysical structures entail. It is therefore worth devoting time to some of the themes in realism so that we can gain a better appreciation for the kinds of influences there are on Christian realism.

#### 2.4. "The Many Moral Realisms"

The preceding discussion highlighted general understandings of realistic thinking. From those, we will primarily be concerned with moral and theological

<sup>22</sup> Mary Warnock, *Ethics Since 1900*, Third Edition, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 107.

<sup>23</sup> Niebuhr makes frequent references to these two thinkers throughout his work. Cf., *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, (New York: Harper & Brother Publishers, 1935), p. 14, n.1; *The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. I*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p. 294, n. 10; *The Irony of American History*, (London: Nisbet & Co., 1952), p. 62, n. 1.; *Faith and History*, pp. 204-205. Richard Fox recounts in his biography of Niebuhr that Niebuhr read and was appreciative of Berdyaev's account of evil and human freedom in the 1930s. See Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 179.

<sup>24</sup> See Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1936) and Reinhold Niebuhr *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. II. The question of privative evil and Christian realism is given consideration in chapter five. Paul Ramsey develops the links between Niebuhr and Maritain, and highlights their differences (particularly their differences over the issue of human reason) in his essay, "Love and Law" in Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (eds.), *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956), pp. 80-123. For a comparison of Niebuhr and Maritain, see Dennis McCann, "Reinhold Niebuhr and Jacques Maritain on Marxism: A Comparison of Two Traditional Models of Practical Theology" in *Journal of Religion*, 58 (April, 1978): 140-168.

<sup>25</sup> See Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, especially chapters four and eight.



realism from this point forward. Because of this, it is important to note, as is indicated in the title of Sayre-McCord's essay, the important fact that it is impossible to speak about moral realism monolithically. Saying that Bruce is a lawyer may well be true, but this leaves unanswered the questions about what kind of law Bruce traffics in, the typical demographic of Bruce's clients and what kind of opposition Bruce typically faces in his legal career. In the same way, saying that Niebuhr is a realist is a true statement, but it does not answer what *kind* of realist Niebuhr is, why realism is important to Niebuhr's theological hermeneutic or what the other types of moral philosophy that typically stand in opposition to realism are. Specificity is needed for the associations that will be made with Niebuhr's version of Christian realism throughout the rest of the work undertaken here.

Niebuhr's association with Christian realism is well-evidenced by the work that has been undertaken on his thought from the mid-twentieth century onward. But, just as with moral realism, Christian realism should not be spoken of monolithically. Neither, though, can Christian realism be understood without moral realism. For this reason, understanding the nuances of contemporary moral realism is important. Though discussing all of the nuances of moral realism is beyond the scope of the current project, highlighting those that are most relevant to understanding Christian realism is important. For this, it is valuable to consider those versions of moral philosophy which are counted as oppositional to moral realism—anti-realism, broadly—and some of the variations therein. These include emotivism, non-cognitivism and non-naturalism.

#### *2.4.1. Anti-Realism*

If moral realism is a commitment to the notion that moral properties exist and do so regardless of what we think of them, then moral anti-realism is a commitment to a proposition of an opposite nature.<sup>26</sup> The moral anti-realist is one who argues for the opposite of what the moral realist proposes, which is to say that the moral anti-realist proposes that descriptors like good, right or just find their existence and relationship to moral acts in non-objective ways. For example, the truth-conditions of moral facts are contingent precisely on what the moral agent believes about those

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<sup>26</sup> This does not, as Brink points out, mean that an anti-realist must be anti-realistic about other disciplines independent of debates in moral philosophy. Instead, "it is possible to be a metaphysical realist about such nonmoral disciplines but a moral antirealist". Brink, p. 22

conditions. Brink introduces anti-realism by dividing its representatives into two categories: “(a) nihilists, emotivists, prescriptivists, and other noncognitivists who deny that there are moral facts or truths and (b) constructivists or idealists in ethics who are cognitivists because they recognize the existence of moral facts and true moral propositions but who claim that these more facts are constituted by some function of our moral beliefs”.<sup>27</sup> Though we will not consider the second category here, the important thing to note is that what appears to distinguish realism from anti-realism is the belief we hold about our beliefs; or, cognitivism.

The realist claims the objectivity of morality independent of our beliefs about it while the anti-realist claims the non-objectivity of morality, because morality is fundamentally related to what we believe about it. It is outside of the parameters of our current project to discuss all of the distinctions drawn by Brink among the anti-realists, but it will be beneficial in the long run to take into consideration emotivist and prescriptivist accounts of anti-realism as representative of the kind of moral philosophy that stands in opposition to that with which we will associate Niebuhr’s realism.

#### *2.4.1.1. Emotivism*

Moral anti-realism challenges moral realism in several places, including on the grounds of the cognitive content involved in moral claims. But as Brink’s above distinction makes clear, there are even disagreements about the cognition involved in making moral claims in anti-realistic thinking. The noncognitivist argues that moral judgments find their content not in the claim that moral properties exist autonomously, but that the content of moral judgment is to be found in the moral agent’s approbation of the judgment made, or of the moral act committed. In other words, “[i]f we reject moral realism...[w]e must treat putative assertions of moral fact, such as ‘x is wrong’, as disguised expressions of the appraiser’s disapproval of x or as disguised prescriptions to avoid x”.<sup>28</sup>

Emotivism is one popular expression of noncognitivism from mid-twentieth century moral philosophy. The perceived deficiencies emotivists found in the moral claims of intuitionists of the early twentieth century gave rise to the influence and

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 18.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 26.

(albeit, brief) popularity of emotivism in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>29</sup> The emotivist is an anti-realist in so far as she argues for the non-objectivity of moral facts and principles. The emotivist is also a noncognitivist by virtue of the fact that she does not accord any cognitive content to her moral judgements.

The central thesis of emotivism is exactly what it sounds like: moral judgments are related to the feelings and emotions of the moral agent who makes those judgments. The point of emotivism is to convince other moral agents to support a particular moral judgment, or adopt a particular position by appealing to that moral agent's emotional sensibilities. Thus, emphasis is placed both on the words the moral agent uses to describe moral acts, and on the emotions or feelings they arouse in the hearer of those words. Warnock highlights three distinctions necessary for an understanding of emotivism. First, emotivism is to be understood by distinguishing between beliefs and attitudes. Second, emotivism is the proposition that moral judgments are related to the feelings of the moral agent. Third, the point of emotivism is to influence a person's attitudes, not his or her beliefs, which will likely lead to a change in behaviour.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, for the emotivist, the moral content of words is based on their interpretations, not on any natural properties to which the moral realist would appeal. For example, if I tell Chris that Nancy has a rabid personality, the response I elicit from Chris will likely be one of caution: he will want to avoid Nancy, if possible, for fear of her unpredictable nature. But if I tell Chris that Nancy is rabidly devoted to the cause of justice for the poor, he will have a much different response to her and will be inclined to think of her as a good person. Thus, "what makes [my description of Nancy] moral is that the terms applied to [her] also both express and induce a *favourable attitude* towards [her]...".<sup>31</sup> The point is that the words I choose to describe Nancy only have moral meaning at the moment that they are interpreted by Chris. Prior to that, no cognitive content or natural properties can be assigned to them; they are morally neutral. Emotivism is only one position which challenges moral realism on the grounds of objectivity and cognition. There are others which make similar claims about the cognitive function of the moral agent without

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<sup>29</sup> G. J. Warnock, *Contemporary Moral Philosophy*, (London: Macmillan, 1967), p. 18.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 21-23.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p. 24.

thrusting aside adherence to beliefs in the objectivity of morality. Let us turn to one of those now.

#### 2.4.1.2. *Cognitivist Anti-Realism: Constructivism*

While emotivists are representative of anti-realists who are also noncognitivists, it is not universally the case that anti-realists must be noncognitivists, though those positions which are cognitivist *and* anti-realist are “less traditional opponents of moral realism”.<sup>32</sup> A constructivist is exemplary of an anti-realist who is also a cognitivist. As such, constructivists share similarities with moral realists.

The constructivist “agrees with moral realism that there are moral facts and true moral propositions but disagrees with realism about the nature or status of these moral facts and truths”.<sup>33</sup> For the constructivist, moral facts and properties do possess an objective nature, but the objectivity of these facts and principles does not exist autonomously from human conceptions about them. The similarity constructivists and moral realists share thus pertains to the cognitive function of the moral agent. But there are differences in how each delineates what is meant by cognition. The differences come in the second part of the sentence, “moral facts and principles exist independently of what the moral agent thinks about them”. The moral realist and constructivist will agree on the first part (“moral facts exist”) of that statement and disagree on the second (“independently of what the moral agent thinks about them”). What this means is that “[the first clause] distinguishes moral realism from nihilism and noncognitivism; [the second] distinguishes moral realism from constructivist versions of cognitivism”.<sup>34</sup> The constructivist, then, stands apart from the moral realist on the issue of cognition. For this person, the cognition of the moral agent plays a significant role in the understanding of moral facts and principles. John Rawls’s “theory of justice” is perhaps the most familiar example of the role that the cognitive function plays for the constructivist.

There is a diversity of interpretations about the nature and interpretation of morality among different constructivists. This fact duly noted, I point here to Rawls’s version of constructivism because it came to prominence during the same

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<sup>32</sup> Brink, p. 19.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.



period of time with which we have to this point been concerned; the mid-twentieth century. Rawls's "original position" is a constructivist account of how moral agents arrive at an understanding of justice which "holds that there is a single set of moral facts that are constituted by some function of our beliefs, often by our moral beliefs in some favourable or idealized epistemic conditions".<sup>35</sup> Rawls argues that, in the original position, the moral agent is capable of deducing, through cognition, those principles ("first principles") which would enable a society to function justly. To achieve this Rawls famously posits the "veil of ignorance" behind which moral agents attend to the question of how a society begets justice at the most fundamental level. That is, with all else being equal (i.e., "place in society...class position or social status", etc.),<sup>36</sup> Rawls assumes that the hypothetical veil will provide the position from which the moral agent is able to ask the question of what *constitutes* (i.e., "constructs") justice for all people of a society.

The reason Rawls's description of justice as fairness is a philosophically constructivist account is because "it specifies a particular conception of the person as an element in a reasonable procedure of construction, the outcome of which determines the content of the first principles of justice".<sup>37</sup> First principles refer to those characteristics of morality—good, right, just, etc.—that are used to describe moral judgments. In this case, the objectivity of moral facts—that which is constituted by the first principles—does *not* exist autonomously from human cognition. Quite the opposite. Moral objectivity is bound up precisely in how the moral agent interprets the facts of morality's existence. In other words, the constructivist, *pace* the moral realist who claims that the meaning intrinsic to moral objectivity exists regardless of any agent's cognition of it,<sup>38</sup> says instead that the meaning of moral objectivity is determined precisely by the agent's cognitive act of interpreting it.

Emotivism and constructivism pose different challenges to moral realism on the grounds of objectivity and cognition. It is not my interest here to defend a

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Rev. Ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 118.

<sup>37</sup> John Rawls, "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory", *The Journal of Philosophy* 77.9 (1980): 515-572. In this article, Rawls undertakes the task of explaining how his understanding of justice as fairness is a version of constructivism, particularly Kantian constructivism.

<sup>38</sup> The moral realist would, however, not allow for the existence of morality without the moral agent.

particular version of moral realism over rival understandings of ethics. Instead, I am only concerned to associate Niebuhr's Christian realism with the trends of moral philosophy from the mid-twentieth century. However, I have pointed to emotivism and constructivism as two important opposing moral philosophies for specific reasons, which will now be considered.

#### *2.4.2. Emotivism and Constructivism: Rival Liberalisms?*

Niebuhr's early ecclesiological and academic life was a broad struggle against liberalism. "Liberalism", though, can be variously understood in relation to the religious and intellectual contexts Niebuhr inhabited. On the one hand, Niebuhr's struggle was against the generic social ethic of religious liberalism, particularly liberal Protestantism, which sought to resolve the complex problems of human existence such as violent conflicts and social inequalities through appeals to simplistic interpretations of the ethic of Christ. Though not quite as flatly vacuous as mid-twentieth century popular culture whose ambassadors urged others to "imagine" a "brotherhood of man", liberal Protestantism in the earlier part of the century was noted for its emphasis on appropriating the sacrificial ethic of Christ into its social environs, which, if taken seriously, would still effect some sort of universal harmony; or, so claimed its adherents. On the other hand, an alternative kind of liberalism Niebuhr found himself at odds with was the liberalism of intellectuals who championed the developments of things like scientific discovery as bases for confidence in human progress and as the vehicles that would finally pull human reason out of the cul-de-sac of religious dogma.<sup>39</sup>

*Moral Man and Immoral Society* is Niebuhr's first full-length answer to the problems posed by these kinds of liberalisms. There he rebukes religious liberals for their veneration of Christ's ethic to the degree that it appears as though this ethic can be commodified as currency in social ethics. Though he affirms that religion must be involved in any quest for social justice because "[e]very genuine passion for

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<sup>39</sup> For a helpful discussion of these two kinds of liberalism, see June Bingham, *Courage to Change: An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), especially chapter 18, "Battling with the Liberals", pp. 221-243. See also Richard Wightman Fox, "The Niebuhr brothers and the liberal Protestant heritage", in *Religion & Twentieth-Century American Intellectual Life*, ed. by Michael J. Lacey, (Cambridge: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 94-115.

social justice will always contain a religious element within it”,<sup>40</sup> he does not think that social justice can be achieved simply by decontextualising Christ’s ethic and anachronistically attaching it to a social context that Christ knew nothing about. “The devotion”, says Niebuhr, “of Christianity to the cross is an unconscious glorification of the individual moral ideal [of Christ]. The cross is the symbol of love triumphant in its own integrity, but not triumphant in the world and society”.<sup>41</sup> In other words, the ethic of Christ cannot be realised in the complicated contexts of the modern world, and its relevance is in the recognition of this fact.

Ultimately, though he does not frame them in these terms, Niebuhr’s criticisms of liberal Protestantism are criticisms of an emotivist mindset such as the one defined above, though he never uses that terminology. The religious liberals of the early twentieth century exhorted their contemporaries to heed the ethic of Jesus as something realisable in their particular social contexts. This familiar refrain of liberal Protestantism is most obvious in the works of Walter Rauschenbusch, one frequent recipient of Niebuhr’s criticisms, but can be traced back even further to the liberal theology of Albrecht Ritschl. Concerning the ethic of Christ, Ritschl says that

what in the historically complete figure of Christ we recognise to be the real worth of his existence, gains for ourselves, through the uniqueness of the phenomenon and its normative bearing upon our own religious and ethical destiny, the worth of an abiding rule, since we at the same time discover that only through the impulse and direction we receive from him, is it possible for us to enter into his relation to God and to the world.<sup>42</sup>

The problem Niebuhr sees with these kinds of sentiments, and with Ritschl in particular, is that they “[do] not appreciate that the uniqueness of the Biblical approach to the human problem lies in its subordination of the problem of finiteness to the problem of sin”.<sup>43</sup> For Niebuhr, Christ’s ethic is never a “rule”, though it is the ideal against which are measured all other ethical judgments. Moreover, when Niebuhr refers to the “law of love” of Christianity, he is inverting Ritschl’s above

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<sup>40</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 80.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p. 82.

<sup>42</sup> Albrecht Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1900), p. 387.

proposition.<sup>44</sup> The law of love belongs to God, exhibited in Christ, and is that which transcends the human inability to love others. The person of Christ does not make it possible to enter into relation with the world; that relationship is already possible by virtue of the fact that we are created as communal creatures. To be human is already to be in relation with the world. What Christ's ethic *does* make possible, in Niebuhr's purview, is an understanding of what it means to be in right relation with the world; that is, what it means to "love" the Other in the world. In that sense, Christ's ethic is the ideal. But it is also impossible precisely because of the sin that Niebuhr thinks Ritschl disregards.

Rauschenbusch, one of the theological heirs of nineteenth century liberal Protestantism, suggests that the significant problem facing Christianity in the twentieth century is the schism between the doctrinal requisition of the Kingdom of God and modern Christian theology. In *A Theology for the Social Gospel* Rauschenbusch gives the theological justifications for the sociological claims made in his earlier *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. Here Rauschenbusch asserts (without giving a specific timeframe) that "[w]hen the doctrine of the Kingdom of God shrivelled to an undeveloped and pathetic remnant in Christian thought, this loss was bound to have far-reaching consequences".<sup>45</sup> These consequences, to Rauschenbusch, are systemic sins, particularly evident in socioeconomic inequality.

Rauschenbusch offers eight "propositions" to remedy the division between Christian theology and doctrinal interpretations of the Kingdom of God. Two of these—the fourth and fifth—appeal specifically to the ethic of Christ. First, although the Kingdom of God existed pre-Christ, Christ "imposed his own mind, his personality, his love and holy will on the idea of the Kingdom....[Therefore, the task of theology] is to infuse the distinctive qualities of Jesus Christ into its teaching about the Kingdom, and this will be a fresh competitive test of his continued headship of humanity".<sup>46</sup> Second, Rauschenbusch continues,

[t]he Kingdom of God is humanity organized according to the will of God. Interpreting it through the consciousness of Jesus we may affirm these convictions about the ethical relations within the

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<sup>43</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I., p. 178.

<sup>44</sup> The law of love is discussed more fully in chapter three.

<sup>45</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), p. 133.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 141-142.



Kingdom: (a) Since Christ revealed the divine worth of life and personality, and since his salvation seeks the restoration and fulfilment of even the least, it follows that the Kingdom of God, at every stage of human development, tends toward a social order which will best guarantee to all personalities their freest and highest development. This involves the redemption of social life from the cramping influence of religious bigotry, from the repression of self-assertion in the relation of upper and lower classes, and from all forms of slavery in which human beings are treated as mere means to serve the ends of others. (b) Since love is the supreme law of Christ, the Kingdom of God implies a progressive reign of love in human affairs. We can see its advance wherever the free will of love supersedes the use of force and legal coercion as a regulative of the social order. This involves the redemption of society from political autocracies and economic oligarchies; the substitution of redemptive for vindictive penology; the abolition of constraint through hunger as part of the industrial system; and the completest cessation of freedom.<sup>47</sup>

This is the syllogism Rauschenbusch proposes: The Kingdom of God is the absence of sin, which is complete human freedom. The Kingdom of God has been historically realised in Christ's love. The progressive overcoming of systemic injustice is happening and will continue to happen until the Kingdom of God is once again historically realised.

This is an emotivist plea because it attempts to appeal to the feelings of the moral agent and influence his or her attitudes as regards the ethic of Christ. Though not a moral philosopher, the point Rauschenbusch hopes to make is that the Kingdom of God, which is the eradication of sin, can be established here and now. Utopia is at hand, if only we modify our attitudes about how we treat others, and who does not want utopia? No one. That is, no one until those who have social advantages realise what they would have to forsake in order for such a kingdom to be established. This is why Niebuhr is so adamant about the inveterate effects of sin.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 142-143.

<sup>48</sup> Niebuhr cannot easily make the same accusation of Rauschenbusch that Rauschenbusch glosses the gravitas of sin in social ethics as he does of Ritschl. Indeed, Niebuhr takes note of the fact that Rauschenbusch's *A Theology for the Social Gospel* devotes a significant amount of attention to the problem of sin in social contexts. Nevertheless, Niebuhr does still criticise Rauschenbusch because he thinks that Rauschenbusch's insistence on the simple application of Christ's ethic to modern social contexts underscores the fact that Rauschenbusch does not "understand either the height of the pinnacle of love or the base of justice. For the height of love is certainly more unprudential and uncalculating than mutual love [which Rauschenbusch equates with Christian *agape*] and it contains

Given Niebuhr's criticisms of Rauschenbusch, if we think of Rauschenbusch's theology as an emotivist appeal, it is little wonder that Niebuhr is not best thought of as an emotivist himself. What may be much less clear is why one cannot make the link between Niebuhr's realism and Rawls's liberal constructivism. Rawls's liberalism was developed around the same world events that shaped Niebuhr's perception of Christian realism, and the two share some commonalities in their critiques and defences of liberalism.<sup>49</sup> To answer the question of why Niebuhr's realism and Rawls's (or any) version of constructivism are similar, but different, we will now turn our attention to the kinds of moral philosophy Christian realism with which Christian realism *is* best associated.

#### 2.4.3. *Cognitivist Realism: Ethical Naturalism and Christian Realism*

As stated, realist claims of any sort are claims about objective realities. But what, exactly, do the descriptions of moral properties as good, right or just mean for the person who is making those claims? What is the content of those claims? It is important to note that there is a difference between the form of moral claims and the content of moral judgment. On one hand, "moral discourse is typically declarative or assertive in form".<sup>50</sup> On the other, the content of "such moral judgments... seem[s] to presuppose the existence of moral facts and principles and the possibility of moral knowledge [by those who make the judgments]. The form and content of our moral judgments, therefore, presuppose cognitivism".<sup>51</sup> That is, the moral realist who makes moral judgments does so expecting that he or she *knows* something—is cognizant—about the constitution of moral properties. These properties are simply

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universalistic demands which challenge any particular community". In other words, the problem is not that Rauschenbusch does not take the ethic of Christ seriously; it is that he does not take the ethic of Christ seriously *enough*. If he did, he would realise that "[i]t is obviously not easy to construct a social ethic from [the] nonprudential, heroic and ecstatic dimensions of the love ethic. That is one of the many reasons why Christianity in its various versions has not been too successful in guiding the collective morality of mankind; which is not to say that these pinnacles of the love ethic are irrelevant". See Reinhold Niebuhr, "Walter Rauschenbusch in Historical Perspective" in *Religion in Life* 27 (1958): 527-536.

<sup>49</sup> Two interesting accounts of the similarities between Niebuhr and Rawls have recently been published. For the first, see Eric Gregory, "Before the Original Position: The Neo-Orthodox Theology of the Young John Rawls", *Journal of Religious Ethics* 35.2 (2007):179-206. Gregory argues that Rawls's early intellectual life was profoundly influenced by neo-orthodoxy (particularly by Emil Brunner), as is evident in Rawls's undergraduate thesis written during his senior year at Princeton. See also Edmund Santurri, "Global Justice After the Fall: Christian Realism and the 'Law of the Peoples'", *Journal of Religious Ethics* 33.4 (2005): 783-814. Santurri's argument is that Rawls's later political philosophy demonstrates an unacknowledged dependence on Christian political realism, particularly of the kind associated with Niebuhr.

<sup>50</sup> Brink, p. 25.

the natural constituents of objective moral reality. "Natural facts and properties are presumably something like those facts and properties as picked out and studied by the natural and social sciences....Ethical naturalism is the claim that moral facts and properties just are natural facts and properties".<sup>52</sup> In other words, the moral realist who is also an ethical naturalist appeals to the natural properties of the autonomous morality from which moral judgments are derived.

Lovin has offered the most thorough account of Niebuhr as realist, and has suggested that Niebuhr be identified as a moral realist who is also an ethical naturalist. Lovin is quick to point out, however, that understanding Niebuhr as an ethical naturalist does not mean that Niebuhr's ethical naturalism is identical to the contemporary philosophical articulations of that term. That is, even though Niebuhr's articulation of Christian Realism as ethical naturalism does not mean that "we should...expect that the substance of the Christian Realist's moral reflection will exactly match that of the contemporary...naturalist".<sup>53</sup> Instead, there are features of Niebuhr's realism which resemble contemporary accounts of ethical naturalism.

For example, Niebuhr's Christian realism already resembles naturalist and cognitivist accounts of realism at both early and late stages of his career, but he puts a distinctive twist on the discussion by framing it in terms of the role of the law of love in the moral agent's life. The law of love is the natural law for Niebuhr. In the same way that the moral realist who is also an ethical naturalist appeals to moral terms like goodness as property-possessing and objective, Niebuhr appeals to love. He understands love in essentialist terms because "God is love" (1 John 4:8). Love is thus part of God's essence (who is also the "ground of human existence")<sup>54</sup>. The fact that God quite literally is love means that when Niebuhr speaks about the "law of love" as transcendent over human existence, he is articulating the same reality as the moral realist who is an ethical naturalist; that is, love (which is all-encompassing of objective morality, particularly of the regulative principles of equality and

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, p. 22.

<sup>53</sup> Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, p. 111.

<sup>54</sup> Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 105.



justice), exists independently ("transcendently", for Niebuhr) of, but is still bound to, human existence. Human existence can never be separated from God's essence.<sup>55</sup>

Love is also interpreted by Niebuhr in cognitivist terms. The moral agent knows that she is called to love her neighbour. How does she know this? By virtue of the fact that her love for the other has been commanded by God.<sup>56</sup>

The Christian love commandment does not demand love of the fellow man because he is with us equally divine (Stoicism), or because we ought to 'have respect for personality' (Christian liberalism), but because God loves him. The obligation is derived, in other words, not from the obvious unities and affinities of historic existence, but from the transcendent unity of essential reality.<sup>57</sup>

This is a similar sort of claim to the moral realist who is an ethical naturalist and who appeals to autonomous moral principles. In this case, Niebuhr claims that love stands independently of what the agent thinks about it, but this does not mean that love is dialectically divided from human cognition.<sup>58</sup> As with the inseparable relationship between essence and existence, the ideal of love, or the objective autonomy of morality, still bears relevance for human contexts. We know *that* we are to love because we know that God loved us first (1 John 4:19). We know *how* we are to love because God loved us in the person and work of Christ. We also

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<sup>55</sup> Jacques Maritain, puts it thus: "...[T]he concept of existence cannot be detached from the concept essence. Inseparable from each other, these two make up one and the same concept, simple although intrinsically varied; one and the same essentially analogous concept, that of being". Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent: An Essay on Christian Existentialism*, (New York: Image Books, 1956), p. 34.

<sup>56</sup> Obviously the question of how one knows that he or she ought to love his or her neighbour is an epistemological question. Niebuhr, though he claims disinterest in the subject, does possess something of an epistemological understanding for how moral agents interpret ethics. Though I do not examine fully this epistemology here, it is not unimportant to the cognitivist and naturalist interpretations of Niebuhrian realism and is worth noting that Niebuhr appropriates elements from both romanticism and rationalism as part of his epistemological understanding, while at the same time maintaining critical distance from both. See Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, pp. 203-212.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213. In light of his use of the word "command" here, it is important to note that Niebuhr's realism should not be thought of as the kind of Divine command ethic frequently associated with Karl Barth. Niebuhr was critical of such an ethic generally, and of Barth's moral theology specifically.

<sup>58</sup> So this statement by Niebuhr should not be identified with the dialectical theology of Barth's neo-orthodoxy. Niebuhr was critical of Barth's dialecticism because he thought that it rendered Christianity a faith "which can easily degenerate into a too simple moralism, [and] may also degenerate into a too simple determinism and irresponsibility when the divine graces is regarded as a way of escape from, rather than a source of engagement with, the anxieties, perplexities, sins, and pretensions of human existence. The certainty of the final inadequacy must not be allowed to become the source of cultural obscurantism". Reinhold Niebuhr, "We are Men and Not God" in *Essays in Applied Christianity*, ed. by D. B. Robertson, (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), p. 174.

know that we are unable to love as God has loved us in Christ because of the problem of sin.

#### 2.4.4. *Intuitionism and Christian Realism*

Based on the above similarities between the descriptions of a Niebuhrian Christian realist and a particular kind of moral realist, we can agree that, on the ground of naturalism and cognitivism, “[t]he Niebuhrian version of moral realism thus leads us in the direction of *ethical naturalism*...”.<sup>59</sup> What Lovin does not think the Niebuhrian version of moral realism leads us in the direction of, though, is intuitionism. Intuitionism is still a morally realistic approach to moral judgment in that it affirms the existence and autonomy of moral facts, though it makes a distinction between autonomous facts of moral and non-moral judgments. It is also a cognitivist account of moral realism because, for the intuitionist, moral judgments are apprehended by a universally shared cognitive reason which enables the moral agent to know what kinds of moral judgments to make. The reason Lovin dissociates Niebuhrian moral realism from intuitionism is precisely because of the intuitionist account of cognition. “For the intuitionist, the fact that so often we ‘just know’ that an act is wrong suggests that these moral aspects of experience are unique properties of actions and situations, not discerned by examining and drawing conclusions about natural properties”.<sup>60</sup> As Lovin rightly notes, the problem with intuitionism for the Niebuhrian realist is that this kind of cognitive emphasis may lead to a too-simplistic reductionism about how moral discernment is carried out. We might even plausibly associate intuitionism with the account of moral judgment articulated in Rauschenbusch’s interpretation of the social gospel: the moral agent intuits that a particular moral act is right or wrong based on whether or not it promotes a universal harmony established by God’s kingdom. Every moral enquiry is thus reducible to simplistic approaches to moral judgment.

But intuitionism is a problem for the Niebuhrian realist only if that realist understands the cognitive function of intuitionism to be reductive to the point that it uncritically narrows alternative moral judgments to stand as “right” or “wrong” choices with little regard for the complications that attend to all moral judgments. Not all accounts of intuitionism are that reductive, though. For example, Mark Platts

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<sup>59</sup> Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, p. 107.

defends a particular kind of intuitionism that stands apart from a reductive account of cognition. This kind of intuitionism “is designed to admit...the possibility of genuine moral dilemmas, of genuine moral conflicts. For this version, there are *many* distinct ethical properties whose occurrence can be detected—sincerity, loyalty, honest, and so on—and there is no reason *a priori* to assume that they cannot conflict, even, perhaps, in tortuous ways”.<sup>61</sup>

Brink, though not an intuitionist, likewise finds implausible the argument that because of the complications of disagreement in moral judgment, intuitionism’s cognitive account suffers from its simplicity. “[T]he existence of conflicting moral beliefs does not demonstrate the existence of conflicting strong objective foundational moral beliefs....People may hold conflicting moral views quite firmly, but these moral views need not be foundational”.<sup>62</sup> In other words, intuitionism is not irreducibly reductionistic if the intuitionist allows for the conflict of moral judgment without presuming the conflict of moral facts and principles. The point of Brink’s presentation of intuitionism is that the intuitionist still appeals to presence and objectivity of moral facts and principles as non-competing, though moral judgments frequently do compete with one another.<sup>63</sup> There is, therefore, a differentiation between the form and content of moral discourse of the kind observed above. In this kind of intuitionism, the intuitionist’s moral judgments assume varied forms and allow for moral disagreement. The content of their moral judgments presuppose, like the cognitivist above, the existence of objective morality. This is an appeal to foundationalism,<sup>64</sup> and it is on this point that the Christian moral realist can agree. That is, the Christian moral realist who is also an ethical naturalist makes arguments based on foundationalism in the same way that the intuitionist in this case

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, p. 108.

<sup>61</sup> Mark Platts, “Moral Reality”, in Sayre-McCord, p. 284.

<sup>62</sup> Brink, p. 111.

<sup>63</sup> To be sure, though, the intuitionist, even in Brink’s account, must still argue in favour of the knowledge of moral facts and principles as inferred from the knowledge of non-moral facts and principles. This is still a morally realistic position, but the moral realist who is also an ethical naturalist would not agree because that moral agent argues for the necessity of moral facts and principles as possessing natural properties.

<sup>64</sup> “Foundationalism holds that one’s belief *p* is justified just in case *p* is either (a) foundational (i.e., noninferentially justified or self-justifying) or (b) based on the appropriate kind of inference from foundational beliefs....Moral foundationalism represents the application of foundationalism to the justification of moral beliefs”. The moral foundationalist affirms the same premises of the foundationalist, relating them to moral belief. As Brink notes, intuitionists tend to be moral

does. These moral arguments allow for disagreement in form, but not in content. The intuitionist and Christian moral realist can agree, then, that the point about the differences between the form and content of moral judgment is an important one to make because, “[i]f we get the facts [or, content] wrong, we will be wrong about the ethics [or, form of moral judgment], too; for the reality to which moral realism [and in this case, intuitionism] refers is not a separate realm of moral ideas, independent of the facts”.<sup>65</sup>

In short, then, the Christian moral realist that we have associated with Niebuhrian realism looks much like the one Lovin presents. However, this realist does not find the same difficulties with intuitionism as that one, if intuitionism is interpreted non-reductively in relation to the form of moral judgment. This is an important point because it was the notion of reductive accounts of moral judgment and the presupposition of a universal moral faculty (reason) that gave Niebuhr so much fodder for his criticisms of the Catholic natural moral law tradition which, prior to Vatican II, appeared very similar to reductive accounts of intuitionism. However, as we will see in chapter three, these criticisms only stand if we allow for a particular kind of reductive intuitionism. Post-Vatican II moral theology found much more consonance with Niebuhr’s Christian realism, which is why the link with intuitionism and Niebuhrian realism is a significant one to reconsider.

## 2.5. *Moral Realism’s Reception in Theological Ethics*

The preceding has been developed so that we can formulate how it is that we are to understand Niebuhr’s Christian realism in the chapters that remain. Additionally, I have accentuated some particular forms of moral philosophy popular in the twentieth century which either (a) further clarify delineations between Christian realism and other theological ethics of the same time period (i.e., Rauschenbusch’s liberalism as representative of a particular type of emotivism); or, (b) emphasise the similarities between some versions of moral philosophy and Niebuhrian Christian realism (i.e., intuitionism).

It might be a temptation at this point to ask what Athens has to do with Jerusalem, particularly with regard to Christian realism. That is, one might plausibly

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foundationalists. Brink, pp. 101-102. Moral realists, on the other hand, tend at least to be foundationalists.

<sup>65</sup> Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, p. 106.



wonder why it is that a discussion of moral philosophy has any bearing at all on Niebuhr's theological ethics. More to the point, the question might be better asked what makes Niebuhr's realism *Christian*. These are fair questions, and need answering before we move on to the remaining chapters in which we will be drawing both on the philosophical and theological terminology drafted in this chapter. Moreover, it will make the more explicitly theological discussion that follows in the final two chapters easier to follow, if we note here the necessary associations between theological ethics and moral philosophy.

#### *2.5.1. What Good is Christian Moral Realism?*

If the only difference between theological realism and philosophical moral realism is the substitution of "God" for "objective morality" as that which independently exists, it is difficult to see how, or why, there is any need to speak of ethics as theological in the first place. What does moral discourse gain by the addition of talk about God to ethics? It seems that realist ethical enquiry is sufficient to provide a coherent system of ethics without relying on specifically religious, or even Christian, propositions about God. Christian realism is only one way of Christian thinking about the relationship between the kinds of foundational beliefs that inform our understanding of the nature of God and the choices we make in our everyday lives, and there are even disagreements among those who consider themselves Christian realists in the Niebuhrian tradition. This variety in approaches notwithstanding, all theological enquiries must ultimately answer what, if anything, language concerning God adds to moral conversation.

The answers to these questions are as varied as the approaches that proffer them, but I want here to draw attention to two. Both are important in terms of the emphasis given to them by Niebuhrian realism. However, neither, I think, accounts for the kind of foundational premise upon which they are constructed. It is therefore worth our time to consider both of these answers before suggesting a different point of emphasis for interpreting Niebuhr's realism.

##### *2.5.1.1. Christian Ethics?*

One answer to the above question is that nothing can be gained by presenting ethics as Christian in any form, realist or not. Indeed, this is the argument of John Milbank and of Radical Orthodoxy, and it is the reason Milbank finds such problems

with Niebuhrianism in the first place.<sup>66</sup> In the past several years, Radical Orthodoxy has developed into an impressive industry by presenting orthodox Christianity as the foundation for all other social sciences.

It is Radical Orthodoxy's understanding that Christian theological enquiry is an intellectual enterprise which reorients all forms of public enquiry (i.e., "secular" social sciences) to their properly Christian theological locus, thus emphasising the primacy of theological over public discourse. The argument is that all social sciences have their origins in Christian theology and therefore, Christian theology needs once again to identify itself as a social science.<sup>67</sup> This is not an attempt simply to recapitulate Christian history from a bygone era; it is a serious consideration of Christian ethics as a discipline. It also differs significantly from the kind of Christian ethic we have to this point associated with Niebuhrian realism, primarily on the issue of the foundational suppositions of realist thought.

Milbank's Christian engages public moral discourse by losing the metaphysical distinctions of realist thought. Pointing to George Lindbeck's post-liberalism, Milbank notes that theology today "has to refuse the idea that faith is grounded in a series of propositions about 'objects' available to our rational gaze: God, eternity, the soul, or incarnate divinity [and, we might add, 'goodness, rightness or justness']...".<sup>68</sup> The problem with maintaining this idea is that it accentuates the notion that there is a sphere of neutrality (e.g., the public or, "secular" square) where questions of moral enquiry are answered. There is no such neutrality for Radical Orthodoxy because all socio-ethical enquiry is related ultimately to theology. There is also, therefore, no true "secular" if, by that term, we mean something that has its origin outside of theology. So while it is true that the theology of Radical Orthodoxy finds itself conversant with those who share its theological bases, it is also equally true that Radical Orthodoxy believes every public enquirer, whether the sociologist or anthropologist, to share similar origins, rooted in the theological, though they may not all recognise those shared bases.

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<sup>66</sup> Milbank's critique of Niebuhr in "The Poverty of Niebuhrianism" is considered fully in chapter five.

<sup>67</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, second edition, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006). See especially Milbank's chapter, "The Other City: Theology as a Social Science", pp. 382-442.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, p. 384.



Milbank's discarding of the metaphysical realism associated with Christian realism, however, does not come at the expense of theological objectivism generally. He still thinks a particular kind of theological objectivism important to moral discourse. Yet,

[f]or Milbank, theological realism is a kind of confessional realism. Philosophical realism is problematic in terms of both epistemology and ontology. Epistemologically, it tends to assume a sort of neutral access to the way things are, which is then capable of universal rational demonstration. Ontologically, it assumes that there *are* things, substances to be known.<sup>69</sup>

That is, an altogether different kind of metaphysic is involved with "confessional" realism, which is of central importance.<sup>70</sup> "Thus, what Milbank seeks to unveil vis-à-vis modern social theory...is that supposedly neutral, rational conclusions in fact stem from prerational commitments...[but] those commitments are either classically pagan or heretical modifications of orthodox Christian accounts".<sup>71</sup> This is essentially Milbank's critique of Niebuhrianism: Niebuhr's realism, Milbank thinks, is a pagan (and thus, liberal) modification of Christian orthodoxy. Confessional realism instead seeks to counteract the logic of a neutral square under the command of universal rationality, attempting to turn away from the aberrations of liberalism to the true source on which the excrescences of this liberalism have grown: Christian orthodoxy.

Because of the emphasis on Christian theology's need to understand itself in social scientific terms, we might expect Milbank to answer our question about whether there is such a thing as specifically theological ethics positively. He does not.<sup>72</sup> The reason for this is, according to Milbank, that "Christian morality is a thing *so* strange, that it must be declared immoral or amoral according all other human

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<sup>69</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), p. 146.

<sup>70</sup> Though we are not fully concerned with Radical Orthodoxy's extremely complicated metaphysic here, it is worth noting that Milbank goes on to describe a modified "metanarrative" realism, different from the postliberalism of Lindbeck, which emphasises that the objective component of theology exists, not autonomously, but in the "performative" acts of human existence. Moreover, these performative acts are related to the narrative of Christ told by the Church, and so are acts which already have their origin in God. See Milbank, *Theology and Social Science*, pp. 387-391.

<sup>71</sup> Smith, p. 145.

<sup>72</sup> John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), "Can Morality be Christian?", pp. 219-232.

norms and codes of morality”.<sup>73</sup> Christian morality, that is, can only be understood in terms of the language of Christian theology. Attempts to understand Christian morality using the language of moral philosophy will only result in hybrid, meaningless languages. Ethics, for Milbank, is in the service of theology.

Thus, one way negatively to answer the question of what is gained by specifically theological ethics is given in the postmodern account of Radical Orthodoxy. Here we have observed the essential position of Radical Orthodoxy’s interpretation of Christian theology. As will be demonstrated in chapter five, I find several points of contention in Milbank’s theological ethic, particularly as it applies to his criticism of Niebuhrian realism. It is thus worth keeping in mind these claims of Radical Orthodoxy as we move forward.

#### 2.5.1.2. *Christian Ethics*

Others, as we will see in the next section, answer the question posed above positively and, therefore, differently from Milbank. That is, when asked whether anything can be gained by a specifically religious account of ethics, there are those who say Yes. They also offer different points of emphasis than Milbank. Sometimes those emphases are on the responsibility of the moral agent to guard and protect the rights of the Other in society.<sup>74</sup>

In liberal societies, when we speak about being “responsible” citizens, we putatively mean something along the lines of fulfilling one’s social duties (i.e., obeying the law, contributing to society, etc.) and not interfering with the ‘human rights’ of other citizens. Human rights talk, though, did not originate with modern liberalism; it has been an integral part of Western society for the past 2,000 years.<sup>75</sup>

There is a distinction to be made on the subject of rights, especially between objective and subjective rights. On the one hand, “A ‘subjective right’ is vested in a

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, p. 219. Milbank never makes clear why other “codes” of morality are not at least as equally strange to “human norms”. That is, why is something like the metaphysics of moral realism, which claims that moral properties exist independently of human conceptions about them *less* strange than “Christian morality”, particularly if, as Radical Orthodoxy claims, Christian theology is the bedrock where the spade of all other social sciences stops turning?

<sup>74</sup> Milbank finds the notion of moral responsibility “in history” too individualistic to be of much use for Christian theology, because he thinks it aligns theology excessively to western capitalism. See John Milbank, “On Baseless Suspicion: Christianity and the Crisis of Socialism” in *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 69, Issue 812 (January 1988): 4-19.

<sup>75</sup> For a helpful introduction to the history of “rights talks”, see John Witte, Jr., *God’s Joust, God’s Justice: Law and Religion in the Western Tradition*, (Grand Rapids, Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), especially “A Short History of Western Rights”, pp. 31-48.

subject (whether an individual, group, or entity), and the subject usually can have that right vindicated before an appropriate authority when the right is threatened or violated.... ‘Objective right’ (or ‘rightness’) means that something is the objectively right thing or action in the [contexts where moral judgments are made]...”.<sup>76</sup> For example, “[y]ou can say [subjectively] that ‘a victim of theft has a right to have his property restored’ or [objectively] that ‘it is right for a victim of theft to have his property restored’”.<sup>77</sup> To relate this to the discussion of moral philosophy, we could say that subjective rights are those rights that pertain to the moral agent, while objective rights are those rights that are related to the status of moral judgments independent of our thoughts about them. There is, consequently, a foundational aspect to the question of rights, particularly with regard to objective rights.<sup>78</sup>

Historically speaking, objective rights have been linked to classical formulations of the natural moral law tradition, while subjective rights have been associated with developments in Enlightenment thought.<sup>79</sup> Natural law formulations of objective rights have been understood to derive from a universal natural moral order. With Enlightenment formulations, however, subjective rights are thought to originate in human nature.<sup>80</sup> But recent developments in rights talk has transitioned from talk about the rights inherently possessed in human nature, to human rights “predicated on ‘human dignity’”.<sup>81</sup> This emphasis on human dignity provides a strong basis for the association of Christian ethics with human rights, which lends authority to the argument that moral enquiry benefits from the inclusion of theological language, and may even be inextricably bound to it. Let us now consider one version of this argument.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, p. 32.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, p. 33.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI’s April 2008 address to the United Nations on the subject of rights. [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2008/april/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20080418\\_un-visit\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/april/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080418_un-visit_en.html). I am grateful to Michael Purcell for pointing this out to me.

<sup>79</sup> Witte, pp. 41-44. For an argument that traces subjective rights not to the Enlightenment, but back to twelfth and thirteenth century jurists, see Francis Oakley, *Natural Law, Laws of Nature, Natural Rights: Continuity and Discontinuity in the History of Ideas*, (New York, London: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, 2005), pp. 87-109.

<sup>80</sup> Witte, pp. 41-44

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, p. 44.

<sup>82</sup> Another account comes from Robin W. Lovin, *Christian Realism and the New Realities*, pp. 183-221. Lovin presents an interpretation of Christian realism that sees associations with William Galston’s presentation of the “value pluralism” of Isaiah Berlin, which is based on moral realism. *Ibid*, p. 79. Lovin thinks Christian realism has much to gain from value pluralism because the latter presents a secularised version of many of the claims that Christian realism makes, and the two

## 2.6.. The “Ineliminably” Religious?

If objective rights are indeed related to the status of objective moral judgments, then subjective rights are linked to ontological considerations because this kind of discussion is about what kinds of rights are accorded to a human based on nothing less than his or her being.

One noteworthy account of human rights that attempts to answer the question of whether or not anything is gained by the inclusion of religious discourse to moral judgments comes from Michael Perry, whose position is that human rights begins with the acknowledgement that all humans have a certain dignity due to the fact that they have been created by God, and that any discussion of human rights which begins with the claim that the human is sacred is “ineliminably religious”.<sup>83</sup> Not only do such claims benefit from theological or religious language; they are predicated upon it.

Perry does not wish to “defend the (particular) claim that every human being is sacred”, but rather wishes to “inquire whether there is an intelligible secular version of the claim...that every human being is sacred, or whether, instead, the claim is inescapably religious”.<sup>84</sup> He concludes that it is, and his argument runs like this. If we start with the foundational premise that all humans are sacred, we must say that their sacredness comes from something else. This something is God, “Ultimate Reality”, or the divine. All humans are of equal standing before God by virtue of the fact that they are all sacred. Human rights are therefore ineliminably religious because they are given by God in the creation of humans. In short,

[i]f...the conviction that every human being is sacred is inescapably religious, it follows that the idea of human rights is ineliminably religious, because the conviction is an essential, even foundational, constituent of the idea. The possibility that the idea of human rights is ineliminably religious poses a problem for the secular enthusiast of human rights, whether she be antireligious or only agnostic.<sup>85</sup>

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together help us understand the moral meaning of life and moral responsibility therein. Though we deal with moral meaning and responsibility some in chapters three and four, Lovin gives a more political interpretation to Christian realism than I intend to do here. Nevertheless, it is worth noting here.

<sup>83</sup> Michael J. Perry, *The Idea of Human Rights: Four Inquiries*, (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 11-41.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, p. 39.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, p. 29. Perry importantly notes that this problem notwithstanding, emphasis on the sacredness of the human finally does not exclude atheists or agnostics from this discussion of human rights. “To suggest that the idea of human rights is ineliminably religious—that there is finally, no intelligible



What this means in terms of what is added to moral discourse by specifically religious language is that the sacredness of other human beings obligates the moral agent to act in certain ways in order to safeguard the subjective rights of those around them. Perry grounds this responsibility in love for the Other and replies to the question of why we are to love the Other, that “the Other, too, no less than oneself and the members of one’s family...is a ‘child’ of God—God the creator and sustainer of the universe...loving ‘parent’—and therefore a ‘sister’/‘brother’”.<sup>86</sup> But unlike Niebuhr who views the responsibility to love the Other as that which is borne out of a response to God who loved us first, Perry says that

[t]he imperative to ‘love one another as I have loved you’ can be understood...not as a piece of divine legislation, but as a...human response to the question of how to live. However, to say that the response is a human one does not entail that it is not also a religious response. What makes the imperative a *religious* human response and not merely a secular one is that the response is the existential yield of a religious conviction about how the world...hangs together: in particular, the conviction that the Other is, finally, one’s own sister/brother—and should receive, therefore, the gift of one’s loving concern.<sup>87</sup>

That is, according to Perry, my responsibility to love (and thereby recognise the subjective rights of the Other) emerges from the fact that I acknowledge a dignity affirmed by the status of the Other as a child of God. To deny my neighbour’s dignified status before God is tantamount to a violation of his or her rights because the two are inseparable.

If, as stated in the introduction, an emphasis on moral metaphysics is important for understanding Niebuhrian realism, it would seem that Perry presents a plausible case for the inclusion of religious language in moral enquiry. Not only does moral enquiry benefit from the inclusion of religious language, it cannot get away from that kind of language, as evidenced by the language of the “sacredness” of our neighbours. Moreover, such a position emphasises the importance of moral

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secular version of the idea of human rights...is *not* to deny that one can take human rights very seriously indeed without being religious, that agnostics, too, even atheists, can take human rights seriously, that they, too, can love the Other. *Undeniably*, atheists...can take human rights seriously; *undeniably*, they and other nonreligious persons can love the Other”. Perry, p. 35. This is so because of the definition Perry gives to religious belief. “A ‘religious’ vision...is a vision of final and radical reconciliation, a set of beliefs about how one is or can be bound or connected to the world—to the ‘other’ and to ‘nature’—and, above all, to Ultimate Reality in a profoundly intimate way”. *Ibid*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>86</sup> Perry, p. 17.

obligations and the place metaphysics ought to hold in our moral enquiries. While metaphysics is important, the Christian realist is suspicious of a too-heavy reliance on it as a way of understanding Christian responsibility. However, this does not lessen the importance of metaphysics. Indeed, Niebuhr's presentation of Christian realism is linked to a certain metaphysical structure—moral realism—and without an understanding of these realist foundations we would not be very successful in our attempts to understand what it means to be Christian realists. Yet Niebuhr understands Christian realism to derive its strength, not from metaphysical assumptions, but from the ability to provide a coherent ethic which speaks to the common experiences shared by everyone, regardless of religious belief. This is why, even early in his career, Niebuhr writes that

[i]t is in fact better for religion to forego perfect metaphysical consistency for the sake of moral potency. In a sense religion is always forced to choose between an adequate metaphysics and an adequate ethics. That is not to say that the two interests are incompatible, but that they are not identical. When there is a conflict between them it is better to leave the metaphysical problem with some loose ends than to develop a religion which is inimical to moral values.<sup>88</sup>

In other words, metaphysics is important, but not so important as to usurp the place of moral "potency". When there is conflict between metaphysical beliefs and moral judgments, we leave the conflict in metaphysics unresolved precisely because we are incapable of resolving all of those disputes, and we can expect that we are wrong in some of our metaphysical beliefs. For this reason, we should never be under the illusion that "the Christian faith will endow the believer with a superior wisdom which will enable him to escape errors, miscalculations, and faulty analyses of the common life of man".<sup>89</sup> Nevertheless, we may have more than a modicum of control over the outcomes of our moral judgments. This is the nature of realist thinking in the first place; moral agents must always choose between the "nicely calculated less and more" of human existence.<sup>90</sup> One of the distinguishing characteristics of Niebuhrian realism, then, is this: that moral engagement and

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<sup>87</sup> Perry, pp. 20-21.

<sup>88</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Does Civilization Need Religion?: A Study in the Social Resources and Limitations of Religion in Modern Life*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1928), p. 214.

<sup>89</sup> Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, pp. 1-2.



deliberation is with everyone in our social contexts who is capable of that kind of interaction, regardless of the religious beliefs held by any party involved.

Yet, while it may be suitable to say that Christian ethics instil in the moral agent a sense of obligation to care for others and ourselves, presumably so do all moral enquiries, whether Christian or not. Those who engage in moral enquiry are not seeking out the best ways to be irresponsible to ourselves or to our neighbours. We do not ask, "Can some good be achieved through careless treatment of my child?" We instead assume that dedicated, careful attention to a child's needs will put that child in the best position to receive the goods that come from our attention. Though one who believes in God may very well likewise think that certain obligations and duties are derived from that belief, it is equally the case that another who does not possess the same beliefs can, like the religious believer, devote herself to the task of responsible living and work toward the same good.<sup>91</sup> Thus, for the Niebuhrian realist, the inclusion of theological belief in ethics neither significantly augments nor abates any moral obligation moral agents might perceive.

The important point to consider is that the prioritisation of living responsibly for the Other in Niebuhrian realism renders this version of realism not only *Christian*, but also *public*. That is, Christian ethics is not something so strange as to be unintelligible to those who do not accept the claims of the Christian faith. Those who do not accept the claims of Christianity may accept a Christian vision of what is good or hopeful for their lives. Thus, Niebuhr, unlike the Radically Orthodox, recognises the need for shared language about moral discourse without the need for shared foundational bases rooted in specifically Christian theological language. For the Christian realist, there can be a common language concerning the good, right or

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<sup>90</sup> Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 103.

<sup>91</sup> Consider, for example, André and Magda Trocmé, who lived in the French village of Le Chambon during the Nazi persecution of the Jews. André was the village pastor who, because of his theological beliefs, felt responsible for the protection of Jewish refugees. Under his leadership, Le Chambon became known as a safe haven to Jews fleeing Nazi death camps and persecution. André's wife, Magda, played a key role in the village's subversive operations and in the protection of the Jewish refugees. She, like her husband, felt a sense of responsibility to protect the Jews, but without the same theological convictions. She understood her moral obligations to be grounded in nothing other than the fact that there were others who were suffering and that they needed help. "Magda's ethic [could] be called a horizontal one: she recognized no imperatives from above; she saw only another's need, and felt only a need to satisfy that need as best she could. She would work for those who needed her help...but she did not work out of awe for any superior being beyond mankind". Philip P.

just without forsaking belief in, and discourse about, God, on the one hand; or, dismissing participation in the public conversation about what is good or hopeful on the other. The nature of responsibility for the Niebuhrian realist

is not to demonstrate universal rational principles of which the Christian traditions merely provide examples. Nor it is to use the Christian narrative to construct an alternative polity in which love prevails and violence is absent. The task of Christian ethics is to determine what the power of love and non-violence can mean for the moral life of an existing society. That determination takes place with varying degrees of specificity, from the Christian citizen who tries to say what justice means at a City Council meeting, to a theologian who tries to articulate the meaning of Christianity for the transformations of Western history....In all cases, however...[w]hat is wanted is a 'critical' attitude and a 'responsible' attitude, an approach that joins in one person the conviction of ultimate meaning and the test of experience.<sup>92</sup>

In other words, morally responsible living gives our lives meaning, because when we seek to love the other, we are ultimately seeking to love Christ, who is the ground of that meaning.<sup>93</sup> The inclusion of theological language in moral enquiry gives us one version of what this means. But not everyone will accept our moral account of meaningful lives,<sup>94</sup> regardless of the kind of metaphysics we embrace to help explain our understanding of goodness, rightness and justness. What, then, is left?

## 2.7. Conclusions

The Christian realist does think that there is something to be added by the inclusion of theological language in moral enquiries. However, this realist is willing to forego the articulation of the metaphysical beliefs to those who do not share them in order to find a more "potent" ethic, though the metaphysical beliefs are still important. But in terms of Christian realism, can the metaphysics presented in the first part of this chapter give us anything other than a common language that we share with those who also call themselves Christian realists? Perhaps it is sufficient to emphasise the language and singularity of Christian theology such as Radical

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Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There*, (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), p. 161.

<sup>92</sup> Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, pp. 117-118.

<sup>93</sup> Cf. Lovin, *Christian Realism and the New Realities*, pp. 192-200. Chapter seven below covers this more thoroughly.

Orthodoxy attempts to do; or, perhaps emphasis on the rights of our neighbours and our moral obligations to protect those rights do give us an understanding of meaningful lives. There is much, I think, to be commended in the latter claim, particularly as it pertains to articulating the hopeful implications of Christian realism. As the chapters unfold, this will be the emphasis of my argument.

Put differently, I think what the metaphysics of Christian realism gives us is a foundation for theological hope. Christian realism neither tells us what to hope for, nor how to go about hoping. It does, however, by the virtue of its framework, give us the interpretive tools necessary for understanding what it is that we are doing when we hope.

This chapter began the discussion about how that framework is constructed. After investigating some of the general features of realistic thought, we considered how those features are relevant to theological ethics. We then observed two different accounts of Christian ethics and how they approach the question of how theological ethics relate to broader moral appeals.

In the next chapter the relationship of Niebuhr's realism to post-Vatican II moral theology will be considered in order to contextualise the discussions from this chapter. By placing Niebuhrian realism in conversation with Catholic moral theology, we are better placed to understand some of the thematic elements in his thought that have been discussed to this point.

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<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, p. 193.

## Chapter Three

### CHRISTIAN REALISM AND THE NATURAL LAW TRADITION

#### 3.1 Abstract

This chapter considers Niebuhr's realism and the Catholic natural moral law tradition. Despite the fact that Niebuhr is frequently critical of natural law thinking, his realism nevertheless shares similarities with the natural moral law tradition, particularly with regard to some of the Vatican II reforms that were established in 1965. Here we will explore Niebuhr's criticisms of the natural moral law's metaphysics, epistemology and theology and compare them to the Vatican II developments in those areas. Following this, the New Natural Law Theory will be considered in relation to Niebuhr's pre-Vatican II critiques of the natural moral law tradition. The chapter will end with a reflection on the issue of "proportionalism" and a comparison of Niebuhr's thought to that of Catholic theologian Josef Fuchs. All of this is undertaken in order better to contextualise the discussion from the previous chapter.

#### 3.2 Introduction

Throughout his writings, Niebuhr is critical of Catholicism moral theology's natural law tradition, which suggests that there is a divinely ordered law by which humans are to live and which is understood through human reason. Mindful of the problem of human sin, the natural law tradition argues that humans are nevertheless capable of comprehending the law because of their reason, which is a part of their natural constitution.

In the later years of Niebuhr's career, however, some began to make the suggestion that though Niebuhr found fault in natural law thinking, much in his articulation of Christian realism embodies features of this tradition, particularly with regard to metaphysics.<sup>1</sup> Those who made this argument did so by associating Niebuhr's realism with the natural law tradition prior to the final 1965 Vatican II reforms, which affected interpretations of natural law thinking. This chapter considers the associations between Niebuhr's realism and the Vatican II reforms. There is still much, perhaps more, that links Niebuhr's interpretation of Christian

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<sup>1</sup> See especially, George A. Lindbeck, "Revelation, Natural Law, and the Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr". *Natural Law Forum* 4.1 (1959): 148, 151; and Paul Ramsey, "Love and Law", in Kegley and Brettall, pp. 79-123.



realism to the Catholic natural law tradition post-Vatican II, and it is worth our time to discuss these links.

Chapter two set the framework for understanding what realistic thinking means and argued that Christian realism offers a groundwork for thinking hopefully about Christian ethics. Considering the relationship between Niebuhr's realism and the natural law tradition provides a helpful context for continuing the argument begun in the previous chapter.

### 3.3. *The Context of Niebuhr's Criticisms*

By the time the second Vatican council had concluded its reforms in 1965, Niebuhr had suffered a stroke that negatively affected his ability to work in the last years of his life. His theological, ethical, and political writings ranging from the mid-1950s to the time of his death largely repeat many of the arguments from his previous writings, though without the creativity and trenchant social analyses of the earlier works. The same can be said for Niebuhr's criticisms of Catholic natural moral law theories, which he considered particularly inauspicious to a Christian social ethic because of their rigidly imperious restrictions on the human moral agent. Though Niebuhr was aware of the second Vatican council's conclusions, he did not address in writing any of the changes that were implemented in the Catholic Church post-Vatican II.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, what we have in Niebuhr's writings that do address the natural moral law are frequently demonstrations of a deep mistrust for what he saw as the systematic methodology of Catholic ethics to pronounce morally final and binding fiats without consideration of the human condition, and a related tendency toward what he called "absolutisation"—the notion that the Catholic Church claims too much for itself in matters pertaining to religious and moral authority—of the natural moral law tradition.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, Niebuhr "would no doubt be surprised to

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<sup>2</sup> It is true that while he never engaged or analysed the resolutions of Vatican II, in 1966 Niebuhr did make note of the fact that he was "more recently [appreciative of] the Catholic tradition...". See Reinhold Niebuhr, *Man's Nature and His Communities: Essays on the Dynamics and Enigmas of Man's Personal and Social Existence*, (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1966), p. 19; cited in Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, William G. Chrystal (ed.), *Young Reinhold Niebuhr: His Early Writings, 1911-1931*, (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1977), pp. 69-74; Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935), pp. 232-233; Niebuhr, *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History*, pp. 204-206, 271; Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Catholic Heresy" in D.B. Robertson (ed.), *Essays in Applied Christianity*, pp. 195-263; Reinhold Niebuhr, "Christian Faith and Natural Law" in D.B. Robertson (ed.), *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1959), pp.

see how closely the revisions of natural law that have developed in Catholic ethics since Vatican II have paralleled his own criticism of...previous moral theology".<sup>4</sup> Indeed Niebuhr himself suggested just before Vatican II that "[p]erhaps there is nothing more important in the ethical reorientation of modern Christianity than a new study of the doctrine of natural law"<sup>5</sup> for modern social contexts.

George Lindbeck's article argues that though "the basic metaphysical, epistemological, and theological affirmations of natural law all seem to be rejected" in Niebuhr's thought, what Niebuhr's readers are ultimately left with is a thinker "whose references to natural law are generally critical, and who rarely has a kind word for Aristotle or St. Thomas Aquinas, [but who] is actually continuing that tradition in the modern world" because of Niebuhr's emphasis on the "one law which is fully and immutably adequate to man's freedom, the law of love".<sup>6</sup>

Regardless of whether or not Lindbeck is correct to argue that Niebuhr continues the tradition of the natural moral law in Niebuhr's articulation of Christian realism (and it will be argued here that he is correct, at least in part), he does rightly suggest that the criticisms Niebuhr offers of the Catholic natural moral law are primarily reactions against metaphysics, epistemology, and theology. However, these are criticisms of categories that largely were made obsolete in favour a new metaphysics, epistemology, and theology in the wake of the second Vatican council's reforms. It will be useful here to consider briefly what those criticisms were, before turning our attention to the ways in which Catholic moral theology itself was modified in the years immediately following the resolutions of Vatican II, as well as how those changes make Catholic moral theology more amenable to Niebuhr's interpretation of Christian realism.

### 3.4. *Criticism of Metaphysics*

The metaphysical elements of pre-Vatican II Catholic natural moral law thinking Niebuhr finds problematic have to do with the relationship between the properties of moral goodness and the social existence of moral agents. More

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46-54; Reinhold Niebuhr, "Love, Justice and the Question of the Natural Law" in Harry R. Davis and Robert C. Good (eds.), *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics: His Political Philosophy and Its Application to Our Age as Expressed in His Writings*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), pp. 163-179.

<sup>4</sup> Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, p. 16. See also p. 108 n. 58.

<sup>5</sup> Niebuhr, *Love and Justice*, p. 154.

<sup>6</sup> Lindbeck, "Revelation, Natural Law, and the Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr", pp. 148, 149, 151.



precisely, Niebuhr is suspicious of Catholic conceptions of *justitia originalis* and the natural law. To Niebuhr, a natural law theory which supposes the loss of original righteousness at the Fall is problematic because it fails to consider the role of human action in the culpability of sin, instead emphasising the impact of a single reality lost at a particular point in history. Additionally, a theory of *justitia originalis* which issues certain requirements affiliated with the moral agent's freedom as human creature is equally problematic because that "freedom can only be tentative and provisional".<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, "[t]his righteousness...is not completely lost in the Fall but remains with sinful man as the knowledge of what he ought to be, as the law of his freedom".<sup>8</sup> The natural moral law, then, "is roughly synonymous with the requirements of man as creature" while *justitia originalis* is comprised of "the virtues faith, hope and love, [which] are the requirements of his freedom...".<sup>9</sup> This creates a division between the natural law (the requirements of creatureliness) and *justitia originalis* (the freedom inherent to creatureliness). Niebuhr does not want to disregard either the requirements or the freedom of humans, and instead thinks that the two need to be brought together in order better to understand what the natural law can provide for Christian ethics.

In other words, overemphasis on the natural law and *justitia originalis* is inadequate to the task of constructing a realistic Christian ethic because these categories do not sufficiently account for the socio-political existence of moral beings. On the other hand, positing—as Niebuhr thinks Catholic natural moral law theories do—such a sharp divide between the two categories is equally problematic because "[t]his distinction obscures the complex relation of human freedom to all of man's natural functions, and the consequent involvement of all "natural" or "rational" standards and norms in sin".<sup>10</sup> What Niebuhr proposes as a buttress to these two categories is an understanding of human moral nature as it relates to the "law of love". Love, for Niebuhr, takes into consideration the paradox of human existence and offers a composite of both the law and freedom requisite to Catholic natural moral law theories. Love is thus a law of both transcendence and

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<sup>7</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. I, p. 280.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 280-281.

immanence;<sup>11</sup> that is, love encompasses the paradox of being free, yet bound, which is unique to humans. Here is the point at which Niebuhr agrees with the metaphysics of Catholic natural moral law theories, and it is worth quoting him at length to demonstrate how:

This character of the theological virtues as “law” to sinful man is perfectly revealed in the “thou shalt” of the law of love: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and all thy soul, and all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” Here something is commanded and demanded. That means law. But what is commanded is a state of heart and mind, a harmony between the soul and God...a harmony within the soul...and a harmony between the self and the neighbour...which, if attained, would exclude all commandment. Such a commandment can be understood as stating an ultimate condition of complete harmony between the soul and God, its neighbour and itself in a situation in which this harmony is not a reality. If it were a reality the “thou shalt” would be meaningless. If there were not some possibility of sensing the ultimate perfection in a state of sin the “thou shalt” would be irrelevant. It is significant that philosophical treatises on morals have universally misunderstood the “law of love” because they lacked the concept of sin as a basis for their analysis.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, emphasis on the law of obligation is essential for ethics, but is irrelevant without an appreciation for the problem of sin. Thus, what is also contained here is the point at which Niebuhr most strongly disagrees with Catholic natural moral law theories reliant on the distinction between natural law and *justitia originalis*: sin. He thinks Catholic natural moral law theories fail to offer adequate accounts of the relationship between ultimate standards of justice/moral nature to the conditions of human nature and finiteness precisely because they fail to consider the fissure in this relationship caused by sin. What results when this fissure is overlooked is the sin of pride;<sup>13</sup> for once the moral agent believes that her actions

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. I, p. 286.

<sup>13</sup> Pride, for Niebuhr, is the universal sin which sits atop all other sins as the eventual product of anxiety and greed. As Langdon Gilkey says, “Our anxiety—hence our will to power and our greed and hence again our imperialism against every potential neighbor—is unlimited. Once we have become the center of our own world, conflict with and injustice toward every other inevitably arises. Here for Niebuhr in the union of finitude and spirit shorn of transcendent thrust lies the source of the inordinate egotism that he terms *pride of power*, which in turn is the source of the social, economic, and political conflicts that plague history”. Langdon Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, p. 104. Gilkey goes on to

cohere with ultimate principles of goodness, she begins to believe that her reason is uncorrupted by the taint of sin. Nevertheless, sin does not abrogate *justitia originalis*, and what should be salvaged from natural moral law theories is an emphasis on “the continued presence in man of the *justitia originalis*, the law of love, as law and requirement”.<sup>14</sup> Love’s “presence” is the “moral sense” that “things are not as they should be”; it is the good toward which we are drawn, and that for which we attempt to act.<sup>15</sup> The law of love is never finally achieved in history; it transcends history, and brings history to completion. “Love is thus the end term of any system of morals. It is the moral requirement in which all schemes of justice are fulfilled and negated”.<sup>16</sup> But this love *is* historically enacted in human acts. However, what prevents the complete realisation of love in history is the human proclivity to sin. Ironically, then, theories of natural moral law become “a quintessential ‘vehicle of human sin’ for the fundamental nature of sin, Niebuhr said, is to elevate relative aspects of life to absolute status”.<sup>17</sup>

There are two main points of Niebuhr’s criticisms of pre-Vatican II Catholic natural moral law theories. First, the doctrines of *justitia originalis* and the natural law of reason must not be delineated to the degree that either of them stands alone. Second, neither of these components of natural moral law theories provides insight into moral nature without a more complete understanding of human sin. Catholicism errs in its overemphasis on originally lost perfection as does any Protestant overemphasis on the effects of sin in social contexts. Thus, Christian realism claims that “[m]an is neither as completely bereft of ‘original justice’ nor as completely in possession of ‘natural justice’ as the Catholic theory assumes”, but Protestantism, because of undue stress on the moral agent’s total depravity, “has no sense of an

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describe the various gradations of pride in Niebuhr’s analysis of sin, including “pride of intellect”, “moral pride”, and “spiritual pride”. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>14</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. I, p. 296.

<sup>15</sup> “The moral sense does not give content to moral judgments. It is a principle of action which requires the individual to act according to whatever judgments of good and evil he is able to form”. And again, “[w]hatever its peculiar character, the important fact... is that men do seem to possess... a sense of obligation toward the good, however they may define it”. See Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, pp. 37-38.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 295.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas C. Berg, “John Courtney Murray and Reinhold Niebuhr: Natural Law and Christian Realism” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought*, 3 (2006): 7.

abiding structure at all".<sup>18</sup> The realist's task is thus to strike a balance between overemphasis on structure, or on the neglect of structure.

What Niebuhr therefore hopes to repair in the metaphysics of natural law thinking is an awareness of sin's tragic existence, inbuilt with the notion that moral agents must act despite sin's presence, but must do so with the knowledge that their moral judgments may be wrong. "Men do have to make important decisions in history upon the basis of certain norms, even though they must recognize that all historic norms are touched with both finiteness and sin...".<sup>19</sup> A theological metaphysic need not focus on what was lost at the Fall, but on what has not yet been gained, and what can only be completed by the fulfilment of the law of love at the completion of history. It must, that is, focus on creation as a dynamic, not static, process. Therefore, a complete restructuring of the natural moral law is not needed in order to assemble a realistic Christian ethic, but reparation of the categories emphasised by Catholicism is.

The question that arises from the metaphysical considerations has to do with how the moral agent knows which moral judgments represent the principles of the natural law. For the natural moral law tradition that Niebuhr criticises, the answer is that human reason is able to discern the principles of the natural law, a fact that Niebuhr gives a far greater amount of criticism than he does metaphysics.

### 3.5. *Criticism of Epistemology*

Whatever rapprochement is achieved between the metaphysical principles of natural moral law theories and Protestant reflections on human nature is not achieved in Niebuhr's criticisms of the epistemology of the natural moral law tradition. He is perhaps at his most critical when he addresses epistemologies he regards as overly self-assured, and the Catholic natural moral law is most culpable in this regard. Though he spends little time constructing an alternative epistemology, it is from Niebuhr's negative evaluations of natural moral law theories' epistemologies that we can construct a semblance of order to his thought on the subject.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Niebuhr, "Christian Faith and Natural Law", p. 50.

<sup>19</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. I, p. 284.

<sup>20</sup> By contrast, Mark F.W. Lovatt argues that "Niebuhr presents an alternative epistemology as the means by which ultimate truth may be revealed". These means are "more emotive types of



Both Christian realism and the natural moral law tradition agree that the principles of goodness are part of an independent natural order, the knowledge of which moral agents never entirely possess, but to which they attempt to assent regardless of any limitations which might prohibit the full disclosure of these principles, such as the inevitable hindrance of sin. Their paths diverge, however, with regard to the nature of knowledge and reason and the justice this knowledge elicits, rather than on the nature of the moral principles to which reason directs the moral agent.

Niebuhr criticises the natural moral law tradition for its understanding of “uncorrupted” reason as a vestige of the pure self left after the first sinful act of humans.<sup>21</sup> More specifically, Niebuhr criticises “medieval” (Thomistic) and “modern” (the construal of the natural law in the eighteenth century by “bourgeois idealists”)<sup>22</sup> understandings of reason for this interpretation. The problem, as Niebuhr sees it, is that an emphasis on uncorrupted reason leads the moral agent to conclude that the elements of justice achieved in socio-political contexts are likewise uncorrupted. What Niebuhr does not consider is that Thomistic conceptions of the natural law distinguish between “speculative” and “practical” reason, a distinction Niebuhr himself would affirm. As Aquinas himself says,

...since the speculative reason is busied chiefly with necessary things, which cannot be otherwise than they are, its proper conclusions, like the universal principles, contain the truth without fail. The practical reason, on the other hand, is busied with contingent matters, about which human actions are concerned: and consequently...the more we descend to matters of detail, the more frequently we encounter defects. Accordingly then in speculative matters truth is the same in

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communication such as myth, symbol and paradox [offered] as replacements for rational dogma in revealing true religion”. Mark F.W. Lovatt, *Confronting the Will-to-Power: A Reconsideration of the Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, (Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2001), pp. 152-153. What Lovatt is discussing is in this passage is epistemology as it concerns the doctrine of salvation in Niebuhr’s theology. Nevertheless, the point is still applicable to the argument here because it points to the larger question of the role epistemology serves in Niebuhr’s realism. It is a questionable assertion that Niebuhr ever adhered to a particular epistemology, or ever constructed an alternative one, and the implausibility of this suggestion lies within the larger argument that Lovatt attempts to make; namely, that Niebuhr interprets reason as “inadequate”, and as “no match for the will-to-power”. Power and reason in Christian realism are not mutually exclusive entities, even in epistemological considerations, and, *pace* Lovatt, it is more accurate to say that Niebuhr understands reason and the will-to-power (egoism) as two sides of the same coin, though reason is in the service of self-interest. For Niebuhr, the “will-to-power uses reason, as kings use courtiers and chaplains to add grace to their enterprise”. Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p. 44. Emphasis mine.

<sup>21</sup> Niebuhr, “Christian Faith and Natural Law”, p. 53.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*



all men...[b]ut in matters of action, truth or practical rectitude is not the same for all, as to matters of detail, but only as to general principles...<sup>23</sup>

In other words, speculative reason is directed at the objective and unchangeable nature of truth, while practical reason is concerned with the fluctuating contexts in which that truth is discerned. According to Niebuhr, though, the knowledge that results from (practical) reason's direction of the moral agent to the disclosure of the (speculative) moral principles of the natural law is a perfected knowledge in natural moral law theories. Niebuhr counters what he perceives as this emphasis on the perfected nature of justice, however limited, in Catholic natural moral law theories with the declaration that all attempts at justice are infected with an "'ideological taint' in human knowledge".<sup>24</sup> Instead, to Niebuhr, human knowledge is "transient" and bound to "cease".<sup>25</sup> This transience is most obvious in acts of justice, which, though potentially beneficial to the social good, are also themselves transient and bound to the sinful contexts in which they occur. They are thus only "approximations" of the higher ideal of love. Human knowledge and acts of justice are bound together by virtue of their perfect natures in natural moral law theories; in Niebuhrian realism, they are likewise bound by the fact of their sinful imperfections.

The question of how the moral agent knows the good is never given a positive answer in Niebuhrian realism. Negative emphasis is instead given to the good the agent does not know, and the proximate efforts at collective justice undertaken to countermand social evils. How and where these efforts are carried out, as well as the implications this has for the theological accounts in natural moral law theories, are the next areas deserving attention as we consider the Niebuhrian critiques of Catholicism's natural moral law theory.

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province), Volume Two, 1<sup>a</sup> II<sup>ae</sup> QQ. 1-114, (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, Inc., 1948), p. 1011.

<sup>24</sup> Niebuhr, "Christian Faith and Natural Law", p. 48.

<sup>25</sup> Cf., Niebuhr's 1960 sermon, "Faith, Hope, and Love", disc N665 14-15, available from *The Reinhold Niebuhr Audio Collection*, Union-Presbyterian School of Christian Education, Richmond, Virginia.

### 3.6. Criticism of Theology

Though Niebuhr does not spare criticism of the idea that the epistemic function of reason and its ensuing knowledge and moral acts are incorruptible, his sharpest critique of Catholicism's natural moral law theory deals with the area where these moral acts are discerned and through which they are carried out: the Church. It is the "height of spiritual arrogance",<sup>26</sup> in Niebuhr's estimation, to associate any modicum of the goodness in moral acts of justice with the independent properties of goodness themselves, simply because the acts of justice are carried out in the Christian Church; and this arrogance is manifest significantly in the Catholic Church. Whereas in the previous enquiries into metaphysics and epistemology, Niebuhr is critical of what he considers both Protestant and Catholic errors,<sup>27</sup> his criticism of the theological conception of the church as the institutional arbiter of uncorrupted justice is reserved primarily for the Catholic Church. Despite the fact that Protestantism is often susceptible to the same self-delusion as Catholicism, especially in regard to knowledge and reason, "[i]t must be admitted...that the Catholic theory of the church as divine institution lends itself particularly to the temptation of confusing relative with eternal values...[which] lacks the proper reservations such as are found in the more consistent Protestant views of the church".<sup>28</sup> In a sense, then, Niebuhr's charge that Catholicism's ecclesiology fails to safeguard itself against the primal urge to usurp God's place as the ultimate moral authority mirrors the earlier analysis of liberalism in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. That is, the Church, as with society, is exemplary of the delusional grandeur of the individual writ large. While the individual moral agent may erroneously believe he or she is capable of understanding the principles of goodness through reason, the Catholic Church is demonstrative of the practical outworking of this pride in its emphasis on justice as the social embodiment of goodness. It should be remembered that Niebuhr's critique of the Catholic Church's identification of justice with goodness does not disregard the fact that those achievements of justice are still only partial.<sup>29</sup> It is not the degree of justice

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<sup>26</sup> Niebuhr, "Arrogance in the Name of Christ" in D. B. Robertson (ed.), *Essays in Applied Christianity*, pp. 197-201.

<sup>27</sup> The outline of Niebuhr's critiques of Catholicism is the only one necessary for our immediate purposes.

<sup>28</sup> Niebuhr, "Arrogance in the Name of Christ", p. 200.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Paul VI's Papal encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*, (March 26, 1967), which emphasises this point. [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-)

achieved that Niebuhr criticises, but the notion that achievements of justice, however partial, are still fully good, even in their incompleteness.

This confusion of goodness with the acts of justice in the Church is the result of two errors of Catholic natural moral law theories, according to Niebuhr. First, the more heavily emphasised doctrine of original sin in Protestant ethics does not receive the same treatment in Catholic moral theology. For Niebuhr, original sin was evident in perennial efforts of humans to assume the place of God as final judge and arbiter over all moral acts. This leads to the obfuscation of human self-interest as the force which taints all moral acts, and which prohibits the realisation of goodness in ethical judgments. When the moral agent abandons self-reflection in favour of moral action, the result is a view of moral reality that assumes knowledge of the unknowable God, and discernment of God's often indiscernible will.<sup>30</sup> "Sometimes the self acts and sometimes it contemplates its actions. When it acts it falsely claims ultimate value for its relative necessities and falsely identifies its life with the claims of life *per se*".<sup>31</sup> Thus, self-interest is the prohibitive agent in realisations of the good, and "[i]t is because self-interest is not easily overcome in even the life of the 'redeemed' that most of the harmonies of life are not the perfect harmonies of fully co-ordinated wills but the tolerable harmonies of balanced interests and mutually recognized claims".<sup>32</sup>

The second error Niebuhr believes a Catholic theological construal of the natural moral law position makes, as we will see, is in the assimilation of Stoic natural law properties. The problem, according to Niebuhr, is not that Catholicism draws on the resources of Stoic thought (for this is inevitable in any system of Christian thought) but that the delineations between "absolute" and "relative", between eternal and temporal, in Catholic natural moral law "are too absolute because it is never possible to define the limits of the force of sin or of the ideal possibilities which transcend sin".<sup>33</sup> Moreover, Catholicism transmutes the moral

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[vi\\_enc\\_26031967\\_populorum\\_en.html](#). I am grateful to Dr. Michael Purcell for pointing this out to me.

<sup>30</sup> The "unknowability" of God is a thematic element that runs through many of Niebuhr's works, and signifies some similarities with Barth's work on this subject. Though it is beyond the scope of the present investigation to consider these occurrences in Niebuhr's work here, it merits notation, especially in light of the fact that the two are usually identified for the differences in their thought.

<sup>31</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny Man*, Vol. I, p. 259.

<sup>32</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Spirit of Justice" in *Love and Justice*, pp. 25-26; and "Love, Justice and the Question of Natural Law" in *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics*, pp. 163-164.

<sup>33</sup> Niebuhr, "Love, Justice and the Question of Natural Law", p. 169.

value of the absolute natural moral law into the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love as moral characteristics embodied by the individual moral agent and the Church as an institutional moral agent, despite the sinful contexts in which both exist. We can see, then, the similarity of Niebuhr's critique of the theology of natural moral law theories and their metaphysics and epistemologies in Niebuhr's return to the conception of sin as the obstruction which prevents the realisation of the good promised in the natural moral law.

Niebuhr thinks that the Protestant concept of *Schoepfungsordnung* ("order of creation"), which offers something of an alternative to the ecclesiology of the natural law tradition, encounters similar difficulties as Catholicism's emphasis on the Church.<sup>34</sup> With this Protestant notion of a created order—made up of the family, church, and government—the church is understood as only part of the larger societal order, instead of the singular establishment through which moral goodness is discerned, justice carried out. Niebuhr thinks that the Catholic natural law tradition and the Protestant concept of the "orders of creation" are essentially at fault for the same thing: each, in its own way, offers a pre-closed hermeneutic which overemphasises the "push of duty" and fails to take seriously the "pull of grace".<sup>35</sup> That is, Protestant interpretations of the "orders of creation" are, like Catholicism, at fault for neglecting the aspect of mystery in human life, grace, at the expense of an emphasis on the order of life.

What Niebuhr finds more tenable for Christian ethics is a pluralistic emphasis which incorporates the church and *all* other areas of social existence as the places in which acts of moral responsibility are conducted.<sup>36</sup> Such an emphasis takes seriously the notion of sin in all moral acts that Niebuhr thinks Catholicism flouts, and defrays responsibility to those areas of life in which these moral acts are carried out.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. 1, pp. 281-282.

<sup>35</sup> Niebuhr, "Love and Law in Protestantism and Catholicism" in *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, p. 150.

<sup>36</sup> I am grateful to Robin Lovin for pointing this out. Lovin offers an account of this pluralistic emphasis in Niebuhrian realism by associating it with Bonhoeffer's account of the mandates. See *Christian Realism and the New Realities*, Chapter six.

<sup>37</sup> This emphasis on pluralism has led some, most notably Stanley Hauerwas, to accuse Niebuhr of lacking an ecclesiology. See Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001), pp. 87-111. It is not my interest to defend Niebuhr's ecclesiology, but for a helpful analysis, see Kenneth Durkin *Reinhold Niebuhr*, (London: Cassell Publishers Ltd, 1989), p. 182. Durkin defines Niebuhr's ecclesiology as commitment to the idea of "the Church as the Body of Christ, as a community of grace, as the leaven



### 3.7. *The Just War Tradition*

Nowhere is the divide Niebuhr drives between Catholicism's stress on the importance of the Church as bearer of moral goodness and the shared responsibility of just and unjust acts in the created order more apparent than in his discussions of the Just War doctrine. Though it is beyond the scope of the immediate investigation fully to analyse Niebuhr's understanding of Just War thinking, a brief excursus into the way he interprets the differences between Catholicism and Christian realism is worth our while, especially in light of the fact that Niebuhr is one thinker frequently credited with the revitalisation of Just War analyses in the late twentieth century.<sup>38</sup> The divide is apparent because it is precisely at the point of applying the theology of the natural moral law to political considerations that Niebuhr thinks Catholicism's theological deficiencies are most perceptibly detected. "The limitations of Catholic natural-law theories", Niebuhr says, "are revealed with equal clarity when applied to the field of international relations. The Catholic theory of a "just war" is a case in point".<sup>39</sup> A word about moral ambiguity merits our brief attention in order to understand Niebuhr's criticisms of war and Catholic natural moral law theories.

Theology for Niebuhr is useless unless it assumes a stance of practical relationship to modern social contexts. The fact that Niebuhr, only in the latter stages of his career, determined that theology was not a relic of "moral idealism" and could, in fact, be useful in the navigation of moral predicaments and the construction of ethics, explains his late appreciation for some prominent theological thinkers, particularly Augustine, from whom Niebuhr draws insights regarding the Just War tradition.<sup>40</sup> Mirroring the criticisms noted above, Niebuhr points out that, regarding the doctrine of Just War, Catholicism fails to offer an adequate theological stance because of its previously mentioned insistence on the absolute status of the church as sole possessor of moral goodness and bearer of social justice, "the arbiter of culture and civilization".<sup>41</sup> A sufficiently realistic theology for Niebuhr accounts for the

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in the social fabric, a concept which was developed by the Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council".

<sup>38</sup> Cf., Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Just War Against Terror*, pp. 99-111; Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, (New York: Basic Books, 1977), p. 110 n. 4.

<sup>39</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. I, p. 283.

<sup>40</sup> See Niebuhr's "Intellectual Autobiography" in Kegley and Bretall, (eds.) *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, p. 9.

<sup>41</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Self and the Dramas of History*, (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1956), p. 68.



fluid nature of social contexts and subsequently adapts its insights to address the moral questions of the present day. While relativism poses an even more spurious alternative to realism than moral absolutism in relation to Just War thinking, Catholicism's social theology nevertheless fails here because "it assumes that obvious distinctions between 'justice' and 'injustice', between 'defence' and 'aggression', are possible".<sup>42</sup> The evolution and changing face of social contexts requires that moral agents adjust their moral imaginations in ways Catholicism fails to capture. Protestantism, too, is blameworthy on this point because of its tendency toward "Lutheran relativism and moral scepticism which finally leaves the Christian without any standards by which he might judge the relative justice of his nation's cause".<sup>43</sup> Despite the ever-changing nature of social contexts, abject relativism leaves the moral agent with no particular principles on which to base moral judgments. Thus, if Catholicism absolutises the relative, Protestantism relativises the absolute. The result in either case is a form of perfectionism untenable for social theology and ethics.<sup>44</sup> Awareness of moral ambiguities tempered by attendant adaptations of moral judgments and actions without recourse to despair is what Niebuhr urges, particularly in the case of war. It should be recognised that there is no single, determinative moral authority, such as the Church, whose pronouncements concerning decisions to engage in or refrain from war as moral or immoral can be accepted absolutely. On the other hand, those disagreements about the rightness or wrongness of such decisions that inevitably do occur should not lead the moral agent to assume that there is no moral grounding on which to stake her claim, or by which to justify her moral reasoning. Realistic moral thinking accepts neither absolutism nor relativism, but seeks to mediate the ways of moral judgment through analysis of the social contexts in which such judgments are made.

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<sup>42</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. I, p. 283.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> John C. Bennett, another, more systematic realist than Niebuhr, criticises Niebuhr for an overly-perfectionist understanding of the love principle. "Professor Niebuhr", says Bennett, "seems to me to divert attention from the real centre of the difficulty [of social ethics] by his extremely perfectionist interpretation of love in terms of complete selflessness and complete non-resistance. His conception of love does not suggest an ideal that has meaning except for the most intimate personal relations". See John C. Bennett, *Christian Realism*, (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1941), pp. 114-115. Bennett's own conception of love sounds much more like the agape-ism of situation ethics associated with Joseph Fletcher of the 1960s, and is akin to the "idealisms" Niebuhr castigates for their naïve and uncritical adherence to simple theories of morality.

Thus, the theological issue for which Catholicism is most challenged by Niebuhr is its understanding of the Church's role in society. Niebuhr emphasises the Protestant doctrine of the created order, but this does not mean that the nature of the church as an instrument of social conscience is lost. What is significant about the theological grounding of Protestant ecclesiology is that it emphasises the fact that "the church is not unqualifiedly the Kingdom of God but rather that place in human history where the Kingdom of God is known and where the judgments of God are felt to be pointed at all human actions and institutions, including the church itself".<sup>45</sup> Thus, the church occupies a unique social function in Niebuhr's theology, but maintains this position only with the awareness of its own culpability in human sin. Disavowal of that sin is expressive of the pride from which the sin stems.

We have now considered Niebuhr's criticisms of the metaphysical, epistemological, and theological elements of Catholicism's natural moral law, but we have not yet considered these criticisms in relation to any of the developments that occurred in Catholic moral theology post-Vatican II. Are Niebuhr's comminations of Catholicism fair? Are they representative of Christian realism today? Moreover, what do they suggest to the modern reader about the methodology informing Niebuhr's own realism? What, if any, are the similarities between post-Vatican II moral theology and Niebuhr's understanding of Christian realism? It is to these questions that we now turn.

### *3.8. Post-Vatican II Catholic Moral Theology*

Niebuhr's criticisms of Catholic moral theology are often inadequate at best, uncritical at worst, when considered in light of the documents of Vatican II and many subsequent documents in the tradition of Catholic moral theology. He exhibits a strong Protestant bias in his criticisms of Catholicism that is representative of what he saw as assimilation with Fascism in Europe,<sup>46</sup> and one that does not consider the many ways his understanding of realism coheres with some of the thought of Catholic moral theology. Still, it seems that some of the critiques Niebuhr offered of Catholicism would today be repeated, even in light of the revaluations of moral theology post-1965. For example, the documents of Vatican II and some of the papal encyclicals since that time demonstrate coherences between Niebuhrian realism and

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<sup>45</sup> Niebuhr, "The Catholic Heresy", p. 209.

Catholic natural moral law theories, particularly with regard to the metaphysical and theological concerns. But they also confirm the differences between the two approaches to moral reasoning, principally on the issue of epistemology. It is worth our time here to consider some of those documents and their relationship to Niebuhrian realism.

### 3.9. *Metaphysics post-Vatican II*

The metaphysical principle on which Niebuhrian realism and the Catholic natural moral law assume common ground is with the issue of moral anthropology's conception of original perfection, defined as the natural law in the human. Catholicism makes the point, noted above as the Niebuhrian emphasis on the "law of love", that for the human there is the moral sense that "things are not as they should be", and that the human *qua* moral agent is the instrument in whom the moral principles of goodness are recognised, though the true nature of these is held at a distance in our moral judgments because the complex nature of the human spirit is in a state of constant tension (sin). Thus, the human is, "a weak and sinful being...[and] often does what he would not, and fails to do what he would".<sup>47</sup> As Fergusson notes, "[a]lthough some rudiments of the natural law are present in the minds of all rational creatures, this does not provide a free-standing basis for an adequate moral theory. Our grasp of the natural law is clouded by sin and error".<sup>48</sup> That is, we may affirm that things are not as they should be, but we cannot always affirm how it is that those things should change. Niebuhr makes this same point when he states that

[t]he consciousness of original perfection is not in some universal self in distinction to an empirical self.... [I]n every moment of existence there is a tension between the self as it looks out upon the world from the perspective of its values and necessities and the self as it looks at both the world and itself, and is disquieted by the undue claims of the self in action. These two perspectives of the self are clearly revealed...in the Pauline process of self-searching. [Paul] declares on the one hand: "For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin." Here the sinful self looks at a reality which seems to be outside the self. It is the law. But in almost the same breath St.

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<sup>46</sup> See Niebuhr, *Essays in Applied Christianity*, pp. 22, 207-212.

<sup>47</sup> "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et Spes*) in Walter M. Abbott (ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II: All Sixteen Official Texts Promulgated by the Ecumenical Council 1963-1965*. Translated from the Latin, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966), p. 208.

<sup>48</sup> Fergusson, *Community, Liberalism and Christian Ethics*, p. 46.

Paul declares: "Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me"....Here the self as ultimate subject looks at the sinful self and declares it is not itself.<sup>49</sup>

Of course, the anthropological framework is not unique to post-Vatican II moral theology, though the stress on these types of concerns is greater in some of those documents.<sup>50</sup> The central basis of natural moral law, even prior to its reception in Christian theological thinking, has always been some derivation of the claim that the law is written in the consciousness of the human moral agent so that certain universal moral norms are discernible to the moral agent. For Christian theology, then, the proscription against murder, or the right ordering of one's desires are in concert with God's ordering of human life, and are naturally present in all rationally moral humans. "All creatures have 'impressed' in their very being inherent tendencies which reflect the ordering and orientation which God their creator wishes for them".<sup>51</sup> Though this notion of a law inscribed in the moral agent has seen considerable modification in Catholic moral theology over the centuries, the basic idea remains.<sup>52</sup> Niebuhr draws short of affirming the Catholic conception of a universal moral law inscribed in human nature, but he does suggest that love, which is the only basis for a common morality, is the "law" of this nature. This is precisely the "reorientation" of the natural law tradition for which Niebuhr calls. Such reorientation argues for the feasibility of the natural moral law in contemporary ethical reflection, which is constituted by a strong emphasis on the anthropological character of human nature. Human nature, to Niebuhr, is

a realm of infinite possibilities of good and evil because of the character of human freedom. The love that is the law of its nature is a boundless self-giving. The sin that corrupts its life is a boundless assertion of the self. Between these two forces all kinds of *ad hoc* restraints may be elaborated and defined. We may call this natural law.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. I, p. 278.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. "Declaration on Religious Freedom: On the Right of the Person and of Communities to Social and Civil Freedom in Matters Religious" (*Dignitatis Humanae*), in *The Documents of Vatican II*, pp. 675-694.

<sup>51</sup> John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 78.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 72-83.

<sup>53</sup> Niebuhr, "Christian Faith and Natural Law" in *Love and Justice*, p. 54.



Niebuhr obviously still seeks to emphasise the doctrine of sin in his reworking of the natural law, but the common anthropological ground he now occupies with Catholic moral theology is apparent. Of course, the moral agent's method of discernment is not rectified for Niebuhrian realism as with post-Vatican II moral theology as we will see momentarily, but it is worth noting the areas of agreement the two do share. We will now continue that exploration by considering the ways in which the theological interpretations of the role of the Church are amended in the moral theology of post-Vatican II contexts in such a manner that they find much in common with Niebuhrian realism.

### 3.10. *Mystery and Social Ethics: Theology Post-Vatican II*

*Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* are two statements in the documents of Vatican II that address the role of the Church in society.<sup>54</sup> *Lumen Gentium*'s importance is signified by its status as the only dogmatic constitution in Vatican II that addresses ecclesiological concerns.<sup>55</sup> It serves as the basis for the revised understanding of the Church's constitution and has been noted for its "ecumenical spirit".<sup>56</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* is more practical and pastoral in timbre, builds on the ideas set forth in *Lumen Gentium* and seeks to define the methodology by which the Church, through self-examination, engages its particular socio-political contexts.

While neither document presents a theological conception of the natural moral law fully assimilated to the Niebuhr's realism, both documents do signify a shift in thinking about the nature of the moral law and its relationship to the Church, as well as moral agents' response to that nature, particularly with regard to two areas of concern, outlined below.

First, *Lumen Gentium* significantly begins its ecclesiological enquiry by assessing the "mysterious" nature of the Church. Rather than discussion of the

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<sup>54</sup> See *The Documents of Vatican II*, pp. 9-101, 199-308, respectively.

<sup>55</sup> Vatican II has one other dogmatic constitution, *Dei Verbum*, which addresses divine revelation. See *The Documents of Vatican II*, pp. 111-128. It should be noted that "*Lumen Gentium* does not actually define any new dogmas. It sets forth, with conciliar authority, the Church's present understanding of her own nature". While this does not differ dramatically for the first Vatican council's ecclesiology, the significant change is that "Vatican II wished to propose its teaching without anathemas and condemnations". See p. 11.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.



doctrine of papal infallibility,<sup>57</sup> the energy of Vatican II's documents is directed at the constitution of the Church and the ethics of the Church-in-society. We might say, in Humean fashion, that the dogmatic constitution of the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, seeks to define what the Church *is*, while the pastoral constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, attempts to answer how the Church *ought* to be in the world-at-large. What unites *Lumen Gentium* is its Christological emphasis which characterises the Church as, mysteriously, the institution whose existence is defined by its unique governance under Jesus Christ, yet whose position in socio-political contexts "indicates that [it], as a divine reality inserted into history, cannot be fully captured by human thought or language".<sup>58</sup> That is, while the nature of the Church is bound to the person of Christ, the epistemological function of knowing how this relationship occurs, or what is required of it is never fully discernible within the context of history; it is a mystery.

Mahoney argues that the role of Vatican II in shaping the "new direction" of moral theology is characterised by two features: "a drive towards totality and an attempt to recognize diversity".<sup>59</sup> Totality in Vatican II, according to Mahoney, is interpreted as a rebuttal to the "neo-scholasticism" of the nineteenth century. Without disregarding twelfth-century scholasticism which sought to reconcile theological statements about the nature of reality seemingly at variance with one another by "packag[ing] and pigeonhol[ing] reality" into analysable components of "objective" and "subjective" reality,<sup>60</sup> the emphasis on totality recognises the necessary analytical divisions between moral agent, moral act, and moral reality, but interprets them holistically, as a part of the same reality; an "intelligible whole".<sup>61</sup>

Diversity does not, as one might legitimately anticipate, mean dispersion of moral agent, act, and reality into the analysable components of objectivity and subjectivity. Instead, Mahoney speaks about diversification in modern moral theology and the second Vatican council in methodological terms. Thus, diversity "refers to viewing the whole, or the totality [of reality], in a diversity of different

<sup>57</sup> Vatican II still adheres to the notion of papal infallibility. However, in contrast to the first Vatican council, there is not an entire section devoted to the doctrine of papal infallibility. See *The Documents of Vatican II*, pp. 48-52.

<sup>58</sup> *The Documents of Vatican II*, p. 14 n. 1.

<sup>59</sup> Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology*, p. 302.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, p. 309.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, p. 310.

ways".<sup>62</sup> Consequently, diversity and totality may be understood as two branches of the same root. What is necessary to supplement any incongruent elements that do exist between totality and diversity, according to Mahoney, is "a recovery of mystery".<sup>63</sup> That is, appreciation of mystery in moral theology is recognition of the fact that the nature of objective reality is never fully knowable in the subjective context of human existence.

Mahoney's suggestion that much of modern moral theology post-Vatican II is involved in the theological appropriation of mystery is the point where we see the strongest similarities between Niebuhrian realism and post-Vatican II moral theology on the issue of the natural moral law. There are significant elements of existentialist thought reflective of the nature of Mahoney's above statement and characteristic of twentieth-century philosophy in Niebuhrian realism, and these extensively inform Niebuhr's interpretation of the natural moral law. This existentialism, however, is not a confusion of the distinctions between objectivity and subjectivity in either modern moral theology or Niebuhrian realism. The categories of objective and subjective still exist, particularly for Niebuhr.

The second point concerning the shifting dynamics of modern moral theology and the natural moral law tradition that is worth noting is the modification in Catholic socio-ethical thinking, especially evident in *Gaudium et Spes*. What results from the aforementioned emphasis on existentialist thought, marked in the recovery of mystery, is a revised understanding of the Church's role in social ethics. Where Niebuhr had been critical of Catholicism for its overemphasis on the Church as institutional arbiter of social goodness, the documents of Vatican II close the distance between Niebuhr's criticisms and the reality of modern Catholic social ethics. Existential and anthropological considerations are prominent in this transition, as is the need to modify socio-ethical judgments by addressing current social injustices through an appeal to the objective nature of morality, tempered by subjective recognition of the often unattainable reality of that objective nature. In *Gaudium et Spes*, the reflections on social ethics are similar to Niebuhr's own considerations on the subject. For example, the statement that "[c]aught up in such numerous complications, very many...contemporaries are kept from accurately

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, p. 321.

identifying [objective] permanent values and [subjectively] adjusting them properly to fresh discoveries”<sup>64</sup> bears resemblance to Niebuhr’s early declaration that, “[t]here is...no problem of history and no point in society from which one may not observe that the same man who touches the fringes of the infinite in his moral life remains imbedded in finiteness....Therefore, it is as important to know what is impossible as what is possible in the moral demands under which all human beings stand”.<sup>65</sup> In other words, Niebuhrian realism and *Gaudium et Spes* agree that moral judgments, though both aspire to the ideal of objective moral nature, must be moderated by awareness of the intransigent nature of moral reality, as well as the perennial flux of the social contexts in which such decisions are made.

For Catholicism, the Church is still instrumental in this understanding of social ethics but it is interesting to note that, in *Gaudium et Spes*, the introductory statement following the preface addresses first the human condition and its social contexts before turning attention to the Church.<sup>66</sup> The prominence of this anthropological emphasis marks an important characteristic of Vatican II’s documents, and further distinguishes some similarities between the renewed moral theology of the twentieth century and Niebuhrian realism. Indeed the authors of *Gaudium et Spes* recognise that, “[a]ccording to the almost unanimous opinion of believers and unbelievers alike, all things on earth should be related to man as their center and crown”, but that this proclamation must immediately be called into question by the subsequent existential question, “But what is man? About himself he has expressed and continues to express many divergent and even contradictory opinions. In these he often exalts himself as the absolute measure of all things or debases himself to the point of despair”.<sup>67</sup> Here the Church is called to help answer these questions because, “[e]ndowed with light from God, she can offer solutions to [the problems the above questions raise] so that man’s true situation can be portrayed and his defects explained...”.<sup>68</sup> Niebuhr affirms this role of the Church

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 302.

<sup>64</sup> *The Documents of Vatican II*, p. 203.

<sup>65</sup> Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 135.

<sup>66</sup> Section titles include, “Hope and Anguish”, “Profoundly Changed Conditions”, “Changes in the Social Order”, “Psychological, Moral, and Religious Changes”, “Imbalances in the Modern World”, “The Broader Desires of Mankind” and “Man’s Deeper Questionings”. See *The Documents of Vatican II*, pp. 201-209.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

when he declares that the “ultimate religious question” to be asked is “[w]hat does life mean”? and when he states that the Church’s “first business is to raise and answer religious questions....”<sup>69</sup> Thus the Church, properly understood, is the institution which inaugurates not only the Kingdom of God (the ecclesiology for which Niebuhr reproaches Catholic moral theology), but which is also the point in which ultimate existential questions are addressed.

Moreover, the characterisation of the human *qua* moral agent in Vatican II evokes the same realist sensibilities of Niebuhrian realism, primarily because of its attention to the problem of sin’s pervasive effect on all moral judgments. For example, when considering the potential of the moral agent’s knowledge of ultimate reality, *Gaudium et Spes* states, “[The moral agent’s intelligence] is not confined to observable data alone. It can with genuine certitude attain to reality itself as knowable, though in consequence of sin that certitude is partly obscured and weakened”.<sup>70</sup> As noted above, Niebuhr’s primary criticism of Catholicism’s natural moral law theory is that it is not mindful enough of the degenerative effects of sin on all moral acts, a criticism, as we see here, potentially rendered unfair in light of the documents of Vatican II.

Of course, the publication of Vatican II was only one event in a series reforms in Catholic moral theology during the twentieth century. Most of the modifications in moral thought that did occur as a result of Vatican II were subtle. For instance, the influence of existentialism is probably reflective of the historical contexts in which Vatican II’s documents were composed, and is only discernible as a result of the critical distance achieved by the historical space between then and now. What was achieved, however, was a consolidation of documents to which one can point as the manifestation of a trend in Catholic moral theology begun at least several decades earlier, as well as a harbinger of many of the documents and papal encyclicals that have been issued in the decades following. Indeed, when one compares statements from Leo XIII’s 1891 encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, such as, “Now a State chiefly prospers and thrives through moral rule, well-regulated family life, respect for religion and justice, the moderation and fair imposing of public taxes, the progress of the arts and of trade, [and] the abundant yield of the land-

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<sup>69</sup> Niebuhr, “Can the Church Give a “Moral Lead””? in *Essays in Applied Christianity*, p. 88.



through everything, in fact, which makes the citizens better and happier” with the statement from *Gaudium et Spes* that

there must be made available to all men everything necessary for leading a life truly human, such as food, clothing, and shelter; the right to choose a state of life freely and to found a family, the right to education, to employment, to a good reputation, to respect, to appropriate information, to activity in accord with the upright norm of one’s own conscience, to protection of privacy and to rightful freedom in matters religious too,<sup>71</sup>

the similarities are apparent. In light of statements such as these which demonstrate the affinities between Niebuhrian realism and twentieth-century Catholic moral theology, Niebuhr’s charge that Catholicism’s theological understanding of the Church is based on a monolithic self-referential nature is often difficult to understand.<sup>72</sup> As suggested above, however, Niebuhr’s criticisms are, at least in part, borne out of a distrust of Catholicism’s association with mid-twentieth century Fascism.<sup>73</sup>

What Niebuhrian realism attempts to accomplish and Catholic moral theology seeks to reconcile in its later twentieth century documents are, as we have seen, not dissimilar, particularly with regard to the issue of the natural moral law. Whereas for Niebuhrian realism the natural law is redefined as the “law of love” and is characterised by the ethical ideal made impossible by the pervasiveness of human sinfulness, Catholic moral theology presents the same idea in terms of the characteristics of human reason and its relationship to the natural law of the moral agent. Neither operates in exactly the same framework, though both have similar objectives. That is, Niebuhrian realism seeks to interpret socio-political realities in light of the significance of the natural law of love in Christian morality for contemporary contexts without recourse to archaic conceptions of the natural law. These realities can only be interpreted by avoiding the extremes of sentimentality and cynicism. Christian realism is thus the attempt to understand human nature, which operates under the natural law of love. Catholic moral theology attempts, as

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<sup>70</sup> *The Documents of Vatican II*, p. 213.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, p. 225.

<sup>72</sup> For a useful discussion of the realism in *Rerum Novarum*, see Lovin, *Christian Realism and the New Realities*, pp. 206-207.



John Paul II's 1993 encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor* made clear, "to foster dialogue with modern culture, emphasizing the rational—and thus universally understandable and communicable—character of moral norms belonging to the sphere of the natural moral law".<sup>74</sup> Though Niebuhrian realism is sympathetic to this kind of dialogue, it is the appeal to "rational" and "universally understandable" moral language that gives this realist pause. Niebuhr, as we have seen, shares much in common with post-Vatican II moral theology, especially as concerns the metaphysical and theological issues of the natural moral law. The epistemological emphasis, however, is an area where the similarities cease, which we will now discuss.

### 3.11. *Reason and the Natural Moral Law Theory: Post-Vatican II Epistemology*

Although in the documents of Vatican II there are similarities to be found between Catholic natural moral law and Niebuhrian realism, there are also still divisions that remain between the two. Particularly with regard to the epistemology of the human in relation to the natural law, one sees little modification in the Vatican II documents and subsequent documents of Catholic moral theology. Again, the issue for which Niebuhr repeatedly rebukes the Catholic moral law tradition is its reliance on human reason in relation to the natural law. As we saw in the previous section, Niebuhrian realism and the Catholic natural moral law tradition similarly embrace anthropological emphases in the formulation of their respective ethical positions. For Niebuhrian realism, though, this means that the moral agent operates under the natural law of love and possesses infinite freedom for good or evil acts. Paradoxically, every human act is at once free to operate in love, and at the same time bound by sin. To be human is thus to be moral.

Insofar as the moral agent is primary in the Catholic natural moral law tradition, he or she is so with respect to the ability to discern the natural moral law written by God, inscribed in the moral agent's consciousness. Though encumbered by the insidious effects of sin, the agent's reason is nevertheless capable of distinguishing and determining the good of the natural moral law. Thus, to be human

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<sup>73</sup> Niebuhr does not consider Pius XI's encyclical, "On the Church and the German Reich", (March 14, 1937), in which the Pius XI condemns Nazism. See <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius11/P11BRENN.HTM>

<sup>74</sup> John Wilkins (ed.), *Understanding Veritatis Splendor: The Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II on the Church's moral teaching*, (London: SPCK, 1994), p. 113.

is to be reasonable. In these terms, the natural moral law is, as Franz Böckle defines it,

not to be found in a natural order from which norms can be deduced, nor is it contained in a summary of rational rules of behaviour or universal legal statements. On the contrary, it is an inner law which claims man as a moral being capable of fashioning himself and the world, and which makes him aware, by harnessing his powers of reflection, of the most important aims which, as a responsible being, he has to accept unconditionally....His fashioning the order of law and morality is a constant task calling for interpretative and determinative thought and action.<sup>75</sup>

Reason serves two purposes in this definition, both of which are related to the epistemology of the natural law. On the one hand, it is the means by which the moral agent apprehends the good intrinsic to the natural moral law. On the other, reason facilitates the actual determination of how that good is to be implemented. Hence, we have Böckle's definition of the natural law as defined by reason. There is an element of human freedom innate to the moral agent's ability to determine the good's implementation, but this is not the same kind of infinite freedom of which Niebuhr speaks when he (re)defines the natural moral law. Additionally, for the natural moral law tradition, revelation does occupy a significant role in the process of apprehension and determination of the good. Once apprehended, though, the moral agent's reason cannot but help assent to the good of the natural moral law.

To assist reason in its effort to understand the mystery [of the nature of reality] there are the signs which Revelation itself presents. These serve to lead the search for truth to new depths, enabling the mind in its autonomous exploration to penetrate within the mystery by use of reason's own methods, of which it is rightly jealous. Yet these signs also urge reason to look beyond their status as signs in order to grasp the deeper meaning which they bear.<sup>76</sup>

In other words, it is still human reason that makes possible such a process as the apprehension and determination of moral good, but revelation serves to guide such exploration. Criticisms from a Niebuhrian perspective of epistemological rationalism in the natural moral law tradition are no different than those outlined

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<sup>75</sup> Franz Böckle, *Fundamental Moral Theology*, trans. By N.D. Smith, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd., 1980), p. 192.

<sup>76</sup> John Paul II, *Faith and Reason: Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II*, (London: The Incorporated Catholic Truth Society, 1998), p. 22

above, because the documents of twentieth-century moral theology do not radically alter the dimension of human reason in natural law theory by the same methodological approach applied to the issues of metaphysics and theology discussed earlier. Indeed the document in Vatican II dealing most with epistemological and revelatory concerns, *Dei Verbum*, undertakes its task by “[r]estating almost to the letter the teaching of the First Vatican Council’s Constitution *Dei Filius*, and taking into account the principles set out by the Council of Trent...*Dei Verbum* pursued the age-old journey of *understanding faith*, reflecting on Revelation in the light of the teaching of Scripture and of the entire Patristic tradition”.<sup>77</sup> That is, the second Vatican council’s statements on the issues of human reason and the natural moral law are essentially reaffirmations of their epistemological heritage which dates back to the earliest foundations of Christian thought, and which establish human reason as the vehicle by which the moral agent assents to knowledge of the natural good.

What was stated in Vatican I and reaffirmed in both *Dei Verbum* and *Fides et Ratio* with regard to the nature of reason and rationality was likewise further developed and articulated in the decades since Vatican II in what is known as the New Natural Law Theory (hereafter NNLT). Any exploration of post-Vatican II moral theology is incomplete without discussion of the NNLT, and it is to this discussion that we now turn.

### 3.6. *The New Natural Law Theory*

Germain Grisez and John Finnis<sup>78</sup> are two Catholic moral theologians responsible for the discernment and description of the principal characteristics inherent to NNLT. It is beyond the scope of the immediate project here to offer an exhaustive account of, and response to NNLT but apropos to the continuation of our considerations of the epistemological elements in Niebuhrian realism and post-Vatican II moral theology, it is suitable briefly to outline some of the prominent features of NNLT and offer comments on their relevance for our enquiry into the dynamics of the relationship between Niebuhrian realism and Catholicism’s natural moral law tradition.

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<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, p. 15.

<sup>78</sup> Joseph Boyle has also been a significant participant in the development of New Natural Law Theory, but we will here only consider the contributions of the John Finnis and Germain Grisez.

In the years immediately following the 1965 completion of Vatican II reforms in Catholic moral theology, little new work was produced on the issue of natural law theory. However, John Finnis's *Natural Law and Natural Rights* and Germain Grisez's three-volume *The Way of the Lord Jesus* offered philosophical and theological considerations both of some of the reforms in Vatican II and of issues concerning natural law theory.<sup>79</sup>

The Finnis-Grisez school principally seeks to affirm the conclusions of Vatican II, though it is at points critical of much in modern moral theology, which Grisez, particularly, considers "to be a series of compromises with secular humanism".<sup>80</sup> Moreover, its formulation of NNLT is an attempt to retrieve many of the elements in the natural moral law of the Thomistic tradition, though it is not a simple recapitulation of that tradition.<sup>81</sup> While Niebuhrian realism is sympathetic to many of the criticisms of Catholic moral theology offered by NNLT,<sup>82</sup> the epistemological issues therein present an insuperable boundary for a realistic construction of ethics in the tradition of Niebuhrianism.

Two kinds of reason—theoretical and practical—are constitutive of NNLT's epistemology, the *sine qua non* of which is the absolute free moral choice of the human agent.<sup>83</sup> For both Finnis and Grisez, freedom in moral choice is the groundwork in any attempt to discern the nature of morality and to make moral judgments which either cohere with that goodness, or which negate it. Any

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<sup>79</sup> The philosophical and theological approach of Grisez and Finnis is an interesting development in Catholic moral-theological thinking in itself because it signifies a methodological departure from the way that Catholic moral theology has traditionally undertaken its various enquiries, even in the late twentieth century. For example, the 1993 papal encyclical *Fides et Ratio* makes clear that there is a delineation between philosophy and theology, whereas Grisez's *The Way of the Lord Jesus* is as much philosophical enquiry as it is theological. Niebuhrian realism is redolent of NNLT's preference for methodologies which include both philosophy and theology, though it does not affirm the same conclusions of NNLT.

<sup>80</sup> Göran Bexell, "Is Grisez's Moral Theology Rationalistic? Free Choice, the Human Condition, and Christian Ethics" in Nigel Biggar and Rufus Black (eds.), *The Revival of Natural Law: Philosophical, theological and ethical responses to the Finnis-Grisez School*, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2000), p. 131.

<sup>81</sup> See Germain Grisez, Joseph Boyle, and John Finnis, "Practical Principles, Moral Truth, and Ultimate Ends", *American Journal of Jurisprudence*, 32 (1987): 99-151.

<sup>82</sup> These include the notions that 1) "By defining human nature in very limited terms, and as possessing only a limited range of principles to guide action, scholastic natural law theory has little capacity to offer a positive vision of how to respond to these new possibilities in human life"; and 2) "Because scholastic natural law theory does not identify the human fulfillment to be gained from living the moral life, and because of its static character...classical moral theology succumbs to the life-denying strictures of legalism". See *The Revival of the Natural Law*, p. 3.

<sup>83</sup> "Practical Principles, Moral Truth, and Ultimate Ends", pp. 100-102.



epistemological enquiry is directed precisely at the knowledge of moral truth, which not only possesses a real nature, but itself can be possessed (i.e., epistemologically determined) by the moral agent, as well as demonstrated in the agent's moral judgments. Thus, "truth is not a mysterious abstract entity; we want the truth when we want the judgments in which we affirm or deny propositions to be true judgments, or...want the propositions affirmed or denied, or to be affirmed or denied, to be true propositions".<sup>84</sup> In other words, the desire or "want" of moral knowledge cannot be otherwise than for the knowledge of moral truth to which any moral epistemological enquiry is directed.<sup>85</sup> This, of course, does not mean that the freedom of the moral agent is freedom to choose only moral good. Moral choice could not rightly be called free in that case. Instead, "[f]ree choice is, properly speaking, an existential principle, a source of both moral good and moral evil".<sup>86</sup> That is, apprehension of moral goodness does not preclude evil acts from the freedom of moral choice.

Consequently, the foundation of absolute free moral choice in accordance with the reality of the truth of nature provides the basis on which>NNLT argues for the epistemology of practical and theoretical knowledge. Theoretical knowledge is thus present assent to, and intellectual apprehension of, *a priori* moral principles. On the other hand, practical knowledge is the application of the moral principles identified by the moral agent; it is the knowledge of the moral good manifested in the moral act. "The truth of theoretical knowledge is in the conformity of proportions to prior reality, actual and possible. This truth is signified by 'is': So it *is*. The truth of practical knowledge...is not signified by 'is' but by 'is to be'—for example, Good *is to be* done and pursued".<sup>87</sup> Specifically, the difference between theoretical and practical knowledge lies in the moral act in which the truth of moral goodness is

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<sup>84</sup> John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 59-60.

<sup>85</sup> We see here strong similarities to John Paul II's statement, though situated in terms of the agent's knowledge of the reality of God, that, "It is not just that freedom is part of the act of faith: it is absolutely required. Indeed, it is faith that allows individuals to give consummate expression to their own freedom. Put differently, freedom is not realized in decisions made against God. For how could it be an exercise of true freedom to refuse to be open to the very reality which enables our self-realization? Men and women can accomplish no more important act in their lives than the act of faith; it is here that freedom reaches the certainty of truth and chooses to live in that truth". *Fides et Ratio*, p. 21.

<sup>86</sup> Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus, Vol. One: Christian Moral Principles*, (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), p. 41.

<sup>87</sup> Grisez, Boyle, Finnis, "Practical Principles, Moral Truth, and Ultimate Ends", p. 115.



either exemplified or it is not. The moral act, then, is determinative of the ways in which the truth of moral goodness is *interpreted* and *applied*, though it has no bearing on the actual nature of moral goodness itself.

Initially, nothing about this description of NNLT's epistemology seems particularly incompatible with Niebuhrian realism as it has been described so far. Of course, there are more nuances to the notions of freedom of choice, the nature of good, and the application of theoretical and practical knowledge than we can discuss here, but some of those nuances are best highlighted by noting the critiques NNLT offers of elements of modern moral theology with which Niebuhrian realism tends to be aligned, as we are about to see.

### *3.12. Proportionalism: NNLT's Critiques of Modern Moral Theology*

Based on what we have described so far, NNLT understands itself in terms of existential ethics.<sup>88</sup> That is, for proponents of NNLT, moral judgments are varied in their applications because they are relative to the social contexts in which they are made (e.g., the geographical location of a particular community, its religious constitution, its historical situation, or any other attendant considerations).

What NNLT is critical of in elements of modern moral theology is "proportionalism", which, similar to consequentialism, is the notion that in moral judgments the moral agent must choose the option that is "the least evil" from among the choices available, and that the choice must be proportionate to the contexts in which the decision is made. While this sounds characteristic of the existentialism affiliated with NNLT above, the difference (at least to Grisez's mind) is that while

[p]roportionalism seems to be verified by the experience one sometimes has in deliberating of finding one possibility definitely better overall than the others; the others simply drop out of consideration. In fact, however, this experience does not support the proportionalist account of moral judgment. For when all options but one drop out of consideration, there is no need to make a free choice,

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<sup>88</sup> Importantly, Göran Bexell takes exception to this claim of existentiality because, he thinks, the free will of existentialism differs dramatically from that of NNLT. For instance, insofar as Grisez is concerned, "freedom of choice in a general sense plays a fairly limited role in [his] theory, as we see when we compare it with the place of free will in existentialist ethics. On this latter view, it is in the last resort the conditional choice which is the correct one, whereas Grisez maintains that there is a standard of rightness found in natural law and the deliverances of the consciences, which the individual must choose in order to be right". See *The Revival of the Natural Law*, p. 132.

and none is made....This suggests why proportionalism is unacceptable as a theory of moral judgment. Its proponents cannot say how to measure benefits and harms in the options so that their proportion can be settled. Moreover, it involves two incompatible conditions: first, that a morally wrong choice be possible; second, that the alternative which is superior in terms of the proportion of good to bad be known.<sup>89</sup>

In other words, the choice between “lesser evils” is a false proposition if we take seriously the terms of the condition that “if the alternative [moral choice] which is superior in these terms is known, [then] other possibilities fall away, and there can be no morally wrong choice”.<sup>90</sup> That is not to say that the moral agent at all times opts for the morally right choice, but that whatever moral decision is made cannot be judged as anything other than morally good because there is not another moral option which serves as a plumb line against which to measure the value of a moral act. Thus, per Grisez, if the good is intrinsically preferred in moral judgments, the moral agent cannot say that he or she has chosen anything other than the good when adhering to proportionalism as framed in the above terms of Grisez, even when such a claim is false. Consequently, for NNLT, proportionalism appears as little more than an extreme version of modern relativistic ethics in which any moral judgment is made good by virtue of the fact that it was chosen by a moral agent who naturally possesses the desire for moral good in his or her moral enquiries.<sup>91</sup> What makes proportionalism so untenable for NNLT as the preceding criticism by Grisez illustrates, is that there is no foundation of free choice for the moral agent because he or she is actually limited by the number of available choices (one) in every moral enquiry. Proportionals would of course want to disagree with this characterisation, as would those who NNLT criticises for being proportionals, even if that is an unfair classification. Though I am not interested in defending the propositions in NNLT’s critiques of proportionalism, the significance of this discussion is of importance to us because the ethics of Niebuhrian realism are similar to those with whom NNLT associates proportionalism. Thus, it is worth our time to

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<sup>89</sup> Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, p. 160.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> Finnis makes an almost identical argument to Grisez, except that he uses the term consequentialism instead of proportionalism and differentiates between modern and older ethical theories “precisely by

consider the account of proportionalism given above in comparison to Niebuhrian realism.

As we have seen thus far, though many of Niebuhr's criticisms of the Catholic natural moral law tradition stand, even in light of Vatican II's reforms (especially with regard to epistemological issues), several are also shown to be attenuated by his inattentiveness to the distinctions of moral theology in the mid-twentieth century. We have observed similarities between Niebuhrian realism and post-Vatican II moral theology (as well as elements of pre-Vatican II moral theology) in terms of their ideologies; that is, in terms of their extant metaphysical and theological considerations. While this conversation has been conducted at the theoretical level, it is important to turn our attention to the thought of an interlocutor representative of post-Vatican II Catholic moral theology with whom Niebuhrian realism shares specific features which are manifestations of the metaphysical and theological considerations hitherto discussed, so that we can further clarify how Niebuhrian realism is actually reliant on the natural moral law tradition in a way that it does not recognise.

### 3.13. *Christian Realism and Moral Theology*

In demonstrating the differences between moral theology before and after Vatican II, and in calling for a metaphor different from that of law to describe the nature of morality in light of the post-Vatican II changes, Norbert J. Rigali draws attention to the fact that some moral theologians and ethicists suggest the responsibility of the moral agent as a metaphorical replacement for law.<sup>92</sup> The need for the change in metaphor, according to Rigali, is signalled by the changing philosophical contexts in which the reforms of Vatican II were conducted. Pre-Vatican II moral theology of the twentieth century was largely conducted in the philosophical tradition of essentialism. Much of post-Vatican II moral theology, as we have seen, related to the philosophical tradition of existentialism. Thus, while earlier moral theology relied on the metaphor of the law as representative of its

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[the former's] adoption of the consequentialist method". See Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, pp. 111-118.

<sup>92</sup> Norbert J. Rigali, "Reimagining Morality: A Matter of Metaphors", *The Heythrop Journal* 31:1 (1994): 1-14. See also Lovin chapter on Niebuhr and Bonhoeffer in *Christian Realism and the New Realities*, chapter six; and William Schweiker, *Theological Ethics and Global Dynamics: In the Time of Many Worlds*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 67-127.

essentialist tendencies, mid-twentieth century moral theology pointed to such metaphors as human nature or existence as representative of its existentialist tendencies.

Rigali ultimately finds the metaphor of responsibility lacking because he thinks it forsakes teleological ethics and thus cannot be otherwise than mired in nihilism.<sup>93</sup> However, he importantly acknowledges H. Richard Niebuhr as the Protestant theologian accountable for this suggestion. Rigali's article points out that other Catholic moral theologians, particularly Josef Fuchs in the mid-twentieth century and Charles Curran more recently, have carried on the suggestion for the metaphorical replacement of law with responsibility, each drawing significantly on the thought of H. R. Niebuhr for their respective understandings of the moral agent's responsibility.

Reinhold Niebuhr, though he states his understanding of the natural law as the "law of love" and thus, in terms different from H. Richard Niebuhr, still demonstrates latent elements in his realism which signal dependence on the moral agent's responsibility in the development of Niebuhrian realism. Whether or not this is directly attributable to H. Richard's influence, the association is an important one because it suggests another connection between the Catholic natural moral law and Niebuhrian realism, especially as it pertains to metaphysical concerns.<sup>94</sup>

Rigali's association of H. Richard Niebuhr with Protestant Reinhold and Catholic Josef Fuchs logically suggests that there is a connection between these latter two thinkers, at least in terms of the particular elements of their thought on which they placed the most emphasis. Upon closer observation, this is precisely what we find, particularly with regard to the notions of responsibility and grace.

### *3.13.1. Fuchs and Niebuhr*

When it comes to the moral choices between greater and lesser evils, some moral theologians—particularly, as we noted above, those who are proponents of NNLT—find Fuchs's ethic too much integrated with proportionalism to be of much

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*: 9-11.

<sup>94</sup> Richard Fox thinks that not only is H. Richard partially responsible for Reinhold's return to theological issues—what Reinhold later came to call "orthodox Christianity"—over against theological liberalism, but also that, "[f]ollowing Richard's lead...[f]or the first time [Niebuhr] introduced the concept of "natural law" into his writing". Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 148.



use to the formation of a tenable Christian ethic. This is chiefly because of the emphasis on moral responsibility that we find in much of Fuchs's works which suggests that the moral agent is always to choose between competing evils. Here, however, we have a theologian writing in the tradition of post-Vatican II moral theology whose thoughts regarding the nature of moral goodness in the unique and fluctuating contexts of human existence mirror much of Niebuhr's own realism. With Fuchs, we get an idea of the kind of Catholic natural moral law ethic with which Niebuhr would have found a great deal of commensurability because of its concern to take into account all of the extenuating circumstances affecting the contexts in which moral judgments are made, as well as any extant factors which affect the judgments themselves.

For Fuchs, responsible moral action is hastened by the need for such action. This seems an obvious statement even to the most ambivalent observer who, when asked why a shelter volunteer offers room and board to a homeless mother, would likely respond, "Because the mother and her children *need* a place to sleep and nourishment in order to live". The point stressed by Fuchs, though, is that morally responsible acts can only arise out of the need for such acts; thus responsibility begets response. Following Vatican II's emphasis on vocation, Fuchs makes the distinction that in the case of Christian morality, the response of the moral agent originates in the call to all humans to be imitative of Christ. "In [Christ's call] the radical character of Christian morality becomes apparent. That is to say that what is of prime importance is personal decision and personal responsibility, undertaken in love, in imitation of Christ".<sup>95</sup> Of course, the suggestion that all that the moral agent needs in order to be responsible is to "imitate Christ" is redolent of the simplistic morality of theological liberalism of which Niebuhr was so critical.<sup>96</sup>

Fuchs is mindful of the dangers associated with such un-nuanced ethical understandings, and thus warns of the risks involved with any moral reasoning which fails to account for the constantly changing socio-political contexts in which moral evaluations and judgments are conducted. This, however, does not mean that Fuchs assumes the non-existence of objective norms in moral reasoning. On the

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<sup>95</sup> Josef Fuchs, *Human Values and Christian Morality*, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1970), pp. 74-75.

<sup>96</sup> We might add that this now extends to the character of much of modern conservative, evangelical Christianity in North America, Great Britain and Western Europe.



contrary, he argues for the absoluteness of moral objectivity in scripture, ecclesial community, and the natural moral law.<sup>97</sup> Where Fuchs differs with some interpretations of the objectivity of moral norms (especially those of the natural moral law criticised most by Niebuhr) is in the applicability of those norms to the social contexts of human existence. According to Fuchs, whereas the nature of moral norms may remain unalterable, their discernment, definition and application do not. What results, then, is the notion that simply because a moral norm is absolute does not mean that it is universalisable.<sup>98</sup> In other words, the application of a moral norm in one context may appear radically different when applied in another context without actually changing the objective status of the norm. As Fuchs states:

Facts—social, technological, economic, etc.—change. Man's experience, i.e., those of human societies, likewise change, on the basis of changing data. Evaluations also, the mind's grasp of human realities, and self-understanding can be altered....All these manifold possible—and actual—alterations have to be brought into the moral judgment of human conduct. Such "new" aspects could call for action which, independent of such aspects, would be out of the question; or they might exclude a course of action which would be commanded under other circumstances...[Thus] behavior norms have, at least theoretically, a provisory character.<sup>99</sup>

According to this definition, the mutability of a moral norm's application is dependent upon the epistemic contexts in which it is applied and the behaviour of the moral agent. "If the absoluteness of moral norms is constituted primarily by their objective effectiveness vis-à-vis the given reality and thus not preeminently by their universality or their universal validity, the question of the applicability of moral norms to reality in the concrete inevitably arises".<sup>100</sup> This question is answered by Fuchs's emphasis on the moral agent's reason and responsibility. Having already noted Niebuhr's criticisms of natural moral law's emphasis on reason, it is sufficient here to state that the same objections apply to Fuchs's conception of the human's ability to discern the nature of moral goodness.

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<sup>97</sup> Josef Fuchs, *Personal Responsibility and Christian Morality*, (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1983), pp. 117-128.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, p. 129.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 131-132.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, p. 133.

Niebuhr's attitude concerning the necessity of moral responsibility, as we see, does not differ dramatically from that of Fuchs's.<sup>101</sup> While Fuchs frames his treatment of moral responsibility in terms of a response to the trends of Catholic moral theology, Niebuhr's handling of the issue is predictably set in Protestant frameworks, particularly as a response to the theological liberalism of the early to mid-twentieth century. "Niebuhr takes it as obvious that the Christian 'critical attitude' which measures all plans against the demands of the Gospel must be balanced by a 'responsible attitude' that is still prepared to make the real choices, even though all the options are less than what love requires".<sup>102</sup> The failure of theological liberalism was precisely that it could neither manage, nor make these "real" choices because it did not "realize that the whole of economic and political life is a system of coercion. That does not mean that it is not necessary and important to make ethical distinctions between types of coercion. But it does make ethical objections to coercion per se rather hypocritical".<sup>103</sup> In other words, responsibility in a socio-political context which is perennially confronted with the realities of coercion means that the moral agent is compelled to make a decision about which form of coercion is most acceptable in a particular context.

Niebuhr never explicitly identifies the association of responsibility in Christian realism with Catholic natural moral law theology. He does, however, think that the characteristic capable of ameliorating some of the theological differences between the Protestantism and Catholicism is the virtue of charity. Noting that Protestants are also tempted to the prideful arrogance for which he has criticised the Catholic natural moral law tradition, Niebuhr writes,

The root of all Christian charity lies in the contrite recognition of the common need of all men for the divine mercy. Charity, particularly the charity of forgiveness is not something which can be demanded or learned. It springs from the heart of those who know themselves to stand under a more ultimate judgment than any of the judgments by which they judge their foes and their foes judge them. If there is not

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<sup>101</sup> Of course, Niebuhr takes exception to the notion that the moral agent's responsibility is an alignment of one's moral responses to the moral interpretation of the Catholic Church. This notwithstanding, the responsibility of the moral agent assumes a similar role for both thinkers.

<sup>102</sup> Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, p. 93.

<sup>103</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "A Christian Philosophy of Compromise", *The Christian Century*, June 7, 1933: 747-748. Charles Clayton Morrison responded critically to Niebuhr's article in the same issue, arguing that though the law of love is not practicable, the task of Christian ethics is to "set about the making of such a world" where it would be practicable. See Charles Clayton Morrison, "Is Christianity Practicable?": 805-807.

something of this ultimate insight informed by faith, in the Christian life, it is a salt which has lost its savor. Catholics may boast of the superiority of their discipline and unity; and Protestants may boast of their superior liberty. But without charity the virtues of each become corrupted by an intolerable self-righteousness. The virtues of each have, indeed, become thus corrupted.<sup>104</sup>

In other words, though he is often critical of the Catholic natural moral law tradition specifically, it is a lamentable fact to Niebuhr's mind that Catholics and Protestants had not reached any kind of accord during the time which he wrote. Therefore, he reminds his readers that though "[b]oth Catholics and Protestants must admit the deep pathos of the fears and prejudices which exist between the two communities of Christendom...if we have any measure of charity we will remember that we are in the same position as our competitor or foe".<sup>105</sup>

Indeed, Catholic moral theologians have also recognised charity as a supreme virtue, on whose essence other virtues are dependent for their existence. "Charity surpasses all charisms and other virtues and is the bond of perfection...[it] is new and unique, a love that surpasses all human sentiments. Its source is God...".<sup>106</sup> We might say that charity, both for Protestantism and Catholicism, is the "possible ideal". Niebuhr speaks of the regulative principles of equality and justice, but neither of these principles could possibly function in their respective roles were it not for the fact that, in Niebuhrian realism, charity, borne out of the law of love, precedes the realisation of these principles. That is, grace goes before justice for Niebuhrian realism. So, while the burden of Christian realism's account of moral responsibility may seem untenable for a viable Christian ethic (due to the fact that whatever judgment the moral agent makes, the option is still, in part, evil), it is important for the realist to temper his or her moral judgments with the kind of charity Niebuhr wants to extend to Catholicism. This common charitable ground is an important place to conclude our considerations of the differences and similarities between Christian realism and the Catholic natural moral law tradition.

### 3.14. Conclusions

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<sup>104</sup> Niebuhr, *Essays in Applied Christianity*, pp. 221-222.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 233-234.

<sup>106</sup> Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (trans. by Sr. Mary Thomas Noble, O.P.), (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University Press of America, 1995), p. 122.

In this chapter I have attempted to contextualise the enquiries begun in the second chapter by placing Niebuhr's articulation of Christian realism into conversation with the Catholic natural moral law tradition, particularly with regard to pre-and post-Vatican II concerns. As discussed, Niebuhr was strongly critical of Catholicism on metaphysical, epistemological, and theological grounds. As we have observed, however, many of these criticisms are answered in the developments of post-Vatican II Catholic moral theology.

Metaphysically, Niebuhrian realism and Catholic natural moral law theology share in common the notion that there is an objective status to the nature of morality. Epistemologically, Niebuhr is critical of what he perceives as Catholic moral theology's declaration that the moral law is discernible by human reason. Additionally, Niebuhr here criticises Catholic ecclesiology for its emphasis on the function of the Church as the final arbiter in the discernment of moral law. Theologically, we have seen how Christian realism and the Catholic natural moral law share many of the same ideas about societal orders and the natural law tradition.

Niebuhr is never able fully to divest himself of the kinds of concerns he has of Catholic natural moral law theology. This may be the result of not being able to see the "forest for the trees"; for, theological and ethical enquiry in the mid-twentieth century, and especially in the years following Vatican II's reforms was strongly influenced by Catholic contributions.<sup>107</sup>

Having covered the foundations of Christian realism and its relationship to other traditions of Christian ethics, we will now turn our attention to the hermeneutical methodology of Niebuhr's realism. The enquiries carried out in chapters two and three beg the question about how Niebuhr's realism goes about the task of interpreting its social contexts. This question of Niebuhr's social hermeneutic will be the question we explore in the next chapter, which will be necessary for the following chapter's evaluation of John Milbank's criticism of Niebuhr.

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<sup>107</sup> See Mahoney, pp. 302-347.



## Chapter Four

### MEANING AND METHOD

#### *4.1 Abstract*

This chapter undertakes a discussion of the methodology of Christian realism's social hermeneutic. Niebuhr presumed the meaningfulness of human existence and he likewise presumed a meaningful framework by which to interpret that existence. The first part of this chapter is devoted to a description of meaningfulness for the realist, as well as a discussion of the process of moral justification. This is followed by an enquiry into William Schweiker's notion of "hermeneutical realism" and its association with a realist conception of ethics. Important descriptions of the moral meaning of history and the forms and validations involved in discerning meaning bring the first part of the chapter to a close. In the second part of the chapter we discuss the relationship of Niebuhrian realism to Christian existentialism, incorporating a helpful essay on the subject by Paul Ramsey. The chapter ends with a consideration of the role of the conscience in Niebuhr's interpretation of moral meaning.

#### *4.2 Introduction*

Christian realism is about the Christian's understanding of the nature of things. The parameters of moral discourse are set within a metaphysic which understands the realities of the things being discussed as existent, yet separate from the socio-political contexts in which they are examined. In a sense, all moral observations and judgments refer to representations of reality; even, perhaps, false representations of true reality. In moral enquiry, this means that where terms such as "good", "right" or "just" are concerned, they can only offer descriptions of what the moral agent believes to be the case about the nature of goodness, rightness, or justness. In Christian realism, when realistic moral agents speak of the good, right, or just, they do so with the understanding that these terms relate to the ultimate reality of God's goodness, rightness, and justness. Realism, then, offers a hermeneutic for understanding the nature of objectivity in relation to human existence.

Moral interpretation is inextricable from the previous experiences of the moral agent and the present contexts in which the agent now lives. To understand the relationship between moral realism, the judgments the moral agent makes (which



is the hermeneutical task of ethics) and human existence, is to make a commitment to a particular system of meaning. Sue Patterson makes this point well when she notes that “[i]nvariably...hermeneutics will be done from some position of commitment to certain beliefs (however ‘interpreted’ those beliefs are), so that to employ a so-called general hermeneutic will be simply to operate from some faith position other than the one upon which the hermeneutic is being brought to bear”.<sup>1</sup> In other words, moral commitments are dependent upon the beliefs the moral agent claims to be true, and are inevitably conditioned by the particular perspectives of the agent. Moral interpretation, then, is as much determined by the contexts in which such interpretation occurs, as by the meaning accorded the objects of interpretation.

In chapter two elements that inform the framework of this metaphysics for Christian realism were observed. There, important associations between moral philosophy and theological ethics were considered in relation to Niebuhr’s realism. Chapter three then contextualised the previous chapter’s enquiries by placing them in relation to Niebuhr’s critiques of pre-Vatican II conceptions of the natural moral law tradition. In that chapter we saw many of the similarities between Niebuhr’s realism and post-Vatican II moral theology. This is a useful investiture because it helps to place Niebuhr’s ethic historically, and it emphasises some of the predominant themes with which he deals continuously throughout his career.

In this chapter we are going to build on the themes developed in the previous chapters, paying special attention to the social hermeneutic of Christian realism. Here we will explore the dimensions of *method* and *meaning* in Niebuhr’s understanding of Christian realism. There are two areas that will be useful to explore in this chapter. First, what William Schweiker has called “hermeneutical realism” is a helpful way of appropriating what a realistic social hermeneutic looks like. Most important for our purposes is the fact that Schweiker defends hermeneutical realism as a method of moral deliberation which “stands in some continuity with traditional Christian natural law ethics” and which provides the modern moral agent a resource with which to engage pluralistic societies.<sup>2</sup> Because we have seen how Niebuhr’s realism is similarly aligned with a particular version of the natural law tradition, Schweiker’s categories for hermeneutical realism will be helpful for our understanding of

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<sup>1</sup> Sue Patterson, *Realist Christian Theology in a Postmodern Age*, p. 55.

Niebuhrian realism. Additionally, we will note that many of the characteristics of Schweiker's hermeneutical realism are similar to those of the pragmatic tradition with which Niebuhr has frequently been identified. Because of this, it will be necessary to consider the role of pragmatic thought in Niebuhrian realism, though we will not offer the kind of comprehensive treatment of it that others have.<sup>3</sup>

The second point of focus will be the influence of existentialism on Niebuhr's realism. Paul Ramsey's helpful essay on this topic will be considered in this portion of the chapter, as will Langdon Gilkey's reading of Niebuhr's interpretation of meaningful history. After considering these contributions, it will be argued at the end of the chapter that the individual conscience contributes to Niebuhr's understanding of a realistic hermeneutic.

The enquiries carried out in this chapter thus continue the task undertaken so far: to understand the framework of Christian realism as interpreted by one of its chief proponents as foundational for what we will soon see to be a realistic theological hope. Let us resume that task now.

## **Part I—Meaning: The “How” of the Method**

### *4.3 On Use and Meaning*

The subject of theological realism is God and the realist's discourse is related to the existence of God. This, however, does not mean that discourse about the reality of God is separated from moral discourse that relates to God's nature. There is an inherent danger in positing such a divide between theologically and morally realistic discourse which is, as Peter Byrne has noted, that if the moral agent “reject[s] the underlying assertion of a moral providence in [every version of realism]”, he or she is “then at liberty to make use of theistic symbols for other ends than to refer to a transcendent *theos*”.<sup>4</sup> What results is moral and theological

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<sup>2</sup> William Schweiker, *Theological Ethics and Global Dynamics*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>3</sup> For some of the sources on pragmatism and Niebuhrian realism, see Charles C. Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age: Reinhold Niebuhr's Prophetic Role and Legacy*, New Edition, (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002), pp. 17-18; Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), pp. 150-164; Martin Halliwell, *The Constant Dialogue: Reinhold Niebuhr & American Intellectual Culture*, (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), pp. 29-78.; Ronald H. Stone, *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr: A Mentor to the Twentieth Century*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), pp. 205-228; Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, pp. 46-54; Mark L. Haas, “Reinhold Niebuhr's “Christian Pragmatism”: A Principled Alternative to Consequentialism”, *The Review of Politics* 61:4 (Autumn, 1999): 605-636.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Byrne, *God and Realism*, p. 155.

relativism. For if the ultimate symbol, the *end* of all theological and moral discourse—God—is reserved for use as a means to some *other* end rather than the source of meaning, the moral agent could rightly claim that the subject, in all actuality, is not God, but is instead a useful linguistic device by which particular moral judgments are justified.<sup>5</sup> We might even say that the linguistic device is not actually *use-full* because its use is annihilated; or rather, where meaning does not precede it, the use never existed. The device cannot be used to any end because there is no *meaning-full* subject from which to derive its use. Thus, it is without use; it is *use-less*. We might also say that moral justification itself is no thing at all if this is the case, because justification is unnecessary in the absence of meaning. That is, if a moral principle's use could somehow exist independently of its meaningfulness (which it cannot), justifying moral judgments would quite literally become a task without meaning. Here we arrive at an aporia: without meaning inherent to our moral justifications, what would be the necessity for such justifications? Moreover, could they have any use?

The Christian realist answers No.<sup>6</sup> This realist claims that the meaning inherent to moral justification is inseparable from God, and that all such justifications are made in light of the declaration that it is from God's existence that meaning is derived. Reality is thus meaningful in the first place. Moral justification is indeed important, but moral justification cannot be established unless the meaning of the interpreted symbol is discerned. That is, meaningfulness precedes usefulness. This is not to say that the agent imparts moral meaningfulness to the hermeneutical subject in the sense that such meaning is derived from the agent by the interpreted subject, or that the agent provides the moral meaning of that which is interpreted, as if that were possible.<sup>7</sup> The paradox, though, is that there is no need for moral

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<sup>5</sup> For a helpful discussion along these lines, "The Brokenness of Divine Language" in Christopher J. Insole, *The Realist Hope: A Critique of Anti-Realist Approaches in Contemporary Philosophical Theology*, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006), pp. 172-186.

<sup>6</sup> So would others who do not make the same claims of the Christian realist, but the Christian realist is the subject most relevant to our present investigations.

<sup>7</sup> Clearly the agent cannot understand meaning of the object interpreted except that he or she knows, or is conscious of the fact that there is an object whose meaning is to be interpreted. It is only in light of such consciousness that we paradoxically know that we cannot posit moral meaning. Sartre makes a similar point when he notes that "All consciousness...is consciousness of something. This means that there is no consciousness which is not a *positing* of a transcendent object, or if you prefer, that consciousness has no 'content'". We are saying the same thing about the usefulness of moral justification: without the content of meaning, moral justification has no use. See Jean-Paul Sartre,

meaningfulness without the existence of the human subject. Moral justification would certainly not exist without the human, and neither would moral meaning. Just as meaningfulness precedes usefulness, existence precedes essence; or, at least nothingness precedes somethingness. Nevertheless, as a constituent of the hermeneutical subject, meaningfulness exists independently of human interpretations of it. The task of justification, then, is to interpret moral meaning and its relationship to our moral and historical contexts. This is not to suggest that when we engage the hermeneutical task we understand fully the meaning of the object interpreted. Nevertheless, limited understanding of moral meaning does not obviate the need for such a task. The point of looking “through a glass darkly” is that we still look. Niebuhr puts this point in a slightly more negative tone when he says that “[t]he proper combination of humility and trust is precisely defined when we affirm that we see, but admit that we see through a glass darkly”.<sup>8</sup>

#### 4.3.1 *The Goal of Justification*

As we have seen throughout our chapters so far, Niebuhr had little use for what he considered “pre-closed” systems of meaning. The social and political contexts of the world are constantly changing, requiring new interpretations and applications of moral meaning, which is their “use”. All such interpretations seek to establish justice in an unjust world. Thus, new situations of injustice may require new interpretations of moral meaning as part of the process of defining moral terms and their usefulness.

For the Christian realist, however, this provisional character of moral meaning and use does not abrogate the source of that meaning. Suppose, for example, that a particular island plant has nutritional value which provides those who eat it with a full daily complement of three essential vitamins. Then suppose that one day a boy who suffers from scoliosis begins eating the plant. Slowly the curvature in his spine begins to straighten. Soon the plant is made widely available to scoliosis sufferers. When they eat the plant, the patients experience the alleviation of pain and the straightening of the curvature in their spines, but they also still receive their full

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*Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, translated by Hazel E. Barnes, (London: Routledge Classics, 2003), p. 7. For more on the relationship between Niebuhr and Sartre, see Ramsey’s “Love and Law” in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Social, Religious, and Political Thought*, pp. 80-89.

<sup>8</sup> See especially Niebuhr, “Mystery and Meaning” in *Discerning the Signs of the Times*, p. 147.



complement of three essential vitamins. Our understanding of the use of the plant is modified, but the plant as a source of usefulness is not. In this case, the first use of the plant is still valid, but we now have an interpretation of its use that is much broader than the one with which we began. We might, however, imagine a similar scenario in which we find out that though the plant provides essential nutrients and is beneficial to those who suffer from scoliosis, it also contains carcinogens of which those who first ate the plant were unaware, making it dangerous to consume in large quantities. In this instance, where the use or meaning of the plant is discussed, the source of that meaning still does not change. Moreover, the plant will continue to be what it is regardless of how we understand it.

But is what we know of the plant all that can be known of it? Are there more uses for it other than those of which we are currently aware? If so, how would we know that, or how, we should continue to investigate the uses of the plant? The answer seems to be an appeal to experience. Considering that we have so far discovered more uses for the plant than the initial one, it is at least reasonable to suggest that there are potential uses for the plant of which we are currently unaware. The moral realist that we met in chapter two would suggest that the plant could indeed have additional uses of which we are unaware. We may eventually discover those uses and thus must live with the knowledge that our knowledge of the plant is potentially incomplete. Additionally, when we speak of the plant's "nutritional" value, we are using a term that appeals to the previous experiences we have had with those values, so that those involved in our conversation would understand what we meant when we used that term. The natural moral law theorist from chapter three would agree with the moral realist of chapter two, at least in part, but would further suggest that because the uses of the plant are universally applicable to all humans, all reasonable moral agents will use the plant where its value is good, and avoid it where the value is harmful. This, of course, does not take into consideration the fact that some moral agents may use the plant for what the natural moral law theorist would consider corrupt purposes, such as the suicidal person who devours enormous quantities of the plant in the hopes of developing cancer to end his or her life. So it



is with moral meaning and justification. The existence of moral meaning does not change,<sup>9</sup> but the use of that meaning probably will.

Though the above illustration is perhaps too simplistic to suit the complexities of moral argument, it is nevertheless helpful for our present considerations because it highlights the kinds of issues with which realistic moral thought generally, and Christian realism specifically, is concerned.

Further, the above illustration begs the question of what, exactly, the purpose of discerning moral meaning is. Discernment of moral meaning is ultimately a justificatory process. That is, the question of moral discernment asks what the moral agent is justified in believing, and whether or not such beliefs may be asserted in the broader scope of moral discourse. In the above example, we can say that the moral agent is “justified in believing” that the consumption of the plant is a remedy and is “warranted in asserting” these beliefs in broader moral discourse based on the experiences reported from consuming the plant.<sup>10</sup> What may result, however, is the realisation that in spite of these declarations, what the moral agent is justified in believing or warranted in asserting is not actually representative of the truth of the moral principle after all. As Stout notes,

[i]t is...misleading at best to express doubt about certain traditional theories of truth by saying that truth is merely warranted assertability....When I am speaking of a proposition that I, here and now, take myself to be warranted in asserting or justified in believing, it will normally be a proposition that I, here and now, will accept and assert as a truth. If not, my rationality will be suspect....[W]hen I, here and now, face the problem of what propositions to deem true and seek criteria for determining this, the propositions I accept as true...will be the ones I am justified in believing. The propositions I assert to be true, if I am being reasonable and candid, will be the ones I am warranted in asserting. And the criteria I use for judging truth will be the ones I use for determining which propositions I am justified in holding true.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, those things that we moral judgments we assert can only be asserted if they are first reasonably believed. What is significant is the realistic tone

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<sup>9</sup> Neither, for the Christian realist, does the source of meaning: God.

<sup>10</sup> I take the phrases “justified in believing” and “warranted in asserting” from Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 25.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 25-26.

Stout's statement strikes. It may seem, *prima facie*, morally myopic to say that justified beliefs are ultimately related to my perspective "here and now", but to what else could they be related? If it is true that to be human is to be moral, all processes of moral justification must take into consideration the limited perspectives of the human agents involved. In Christian realist terms, this means that "[j]ustification...*is* relative to our place in history and society and the particular sets of beliefs that place offers us".<sup>12</sup> Thus, returning to our above example, if we argue that the plant's properties are universally true for all people and at the same time argue that not only do we not know all that is knowable about the plant, but that the beliefs that we do hold to be true about it may, in fact, not be true at all, how do we avoid logical incoherence on the one hand and relativism on the other? For belief that the plant does possess an objective nature, but that its moral meaning or usage is subject to change may seem either to be self-referentially incoherent on the one hand, or it may render our statements about the plant relativistic on the other. The tension created by this dualism is what a realistic ethic seeks to understand. Forced rapprochement of the two statements is not the goal of such an ethic; understanding how both statements can be true for our moral and historical contexts is.

If the answer to the question of why the discernment of moral meaning is important is that it is ultimately a process intended to justify the moral beliefs we hold and to validate our assertion of those beliefs in wider moral discourse, the question of how the process of discernment is carried out still remains to be answered. It is sensible to suggest that, as with all moral enquiries, Christian realism wants its moral beliefs and assertions to be justified. What may be much less clear, however, is *how* the hermeneutical process of that justification is carried out. Because of this, it is to the discussion of hermeneutics in the Christian realism articulated by Niebuhr that we now turn.

#### 4.3.2 *Hermeneutical Realism*

"Hermeneutical thinking", Schweiker tells us, "is irreducibly tied to the problems of life. Such reflection does not necessarily attempt to escape or control our finitude; nor must it attempt to reduce all texts and traditions to existentialist

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<sup>12</sup> Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, p. 52.

questions about the meaning of authentic human life as an act of freedom".<sup>13</sup> At the same time, the dialectical and equally accurate statement here is that hermeneutical thinking *does* provide a foundation from which we attempt control over our finitude. This Niebuhr recognises as moral imagination expressed in human self-transcendence. The hermeneutical process likewise must at some point interpret texts and traditions existentially as part of the justificatory process for deriving meaning from the "problems of life". Without such interpretation, the effort to understand those problems denigrates into abject anxiety over the fact that those problems may actually be meaningless.<sup>14</sup> The point of Schweiker's statement is that some attempts to control our finitude and to offer existential interpretations of life's problems are inevitably elements of the hermeneutical process; they just cannot be the sum of what is involved in that process. Niebuhr's version of Christian realism is an attempt to negotiate the balance between unrealistic escapism and existential reductionism that Schweiker highlights.

The problems of life occur in the incidents of history. For this reason, the hermeneutical process of Christian realism is an attempt to interpret the meaning of history so that we can subsequently understand the meaning of the problems of history. Niebuhr suggests that

[a] basic distinction may be made between various interpretations of the meaning of life by noting their attitude towards history. Those which include history in the realm of meaning see it as a process which points and moves towards a fuller disclosure and realization of life's essential meaning. Those which exclude it, do so because they regard history as no more than natural finiteness, from which the human spirit must be freed. They consider man's involvement in nature as the very cause of evil, and define the ultimate redemption of life as emancipation from finiteness. In the one case history is regarded as potentially meaningful, waiting for the ultimate disclosure and realization of its meaning. In the other case it is believed to be essentially meaningless. It may be regarded as a realm of order; but the order is only the subordinate one of natural necessity which affects the meaning of life negatively.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> William Schweiker, *Mimetic Reflections: A Study in Hermeneutics, Theology, and Ethics*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990), p. xi.

<sup>14</sup> "Anxiety" has dual connotations for Niebuhr. As June Bingham notes it is "used theologically for the feeling all men have because of their combination of finiteness and freedom, and psychiatrically for the feeling the individual may have because of his unconscious conflicts and repressions". Bingham, *Courage to Change*, p. 195, n. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. II, p. 2.

Niebuhr is himself a part of the former camp, and he considers the thought of Christian realism to be among those who understand history as moving towards something which is more meaningful than the ways in which history seems in light of its problems. Moreover, the natural principles of moral realism and the abiding structure of the natural moral law, both of which we observed in the previous chapters, provide the basis for Niebuhr's moral interpretation of history and God, who transcends history.

#### *4.4. The Moral Meaning of History*

In an article written shortly after Niebuhr's death, Langdon Gilkey identifies seven categories by which to understand Niebuhr's theological interpretation of history. These include first, a "vertical dialectic" between "transcendence and creatureliness"; second, the "ontological structure" of the human as "constant throughout history"; third, human sinfulness as "a permanent characteristic of history"; fourth, the future as "a part of history as history has manifested itself in past and present experience"; fifth, the notion that "[t]he resolution of history's problems [occurs] not in terms of the manifestation of divine power *over* evil but in terms of the manifestation of the divine love and mercy *to* evil..."; sixth, the declaration that the structures which constitute history, that is, "all civilizations, social orders, and groups in history are by no means equal in virtue or in worth"; and seventh, "that eschatological symbols" occupy a more unique role in Niebuhr's theology than for most others who were concerned with eschatology during his time.<sup>16</sup> These provide important categorical classifications for better interpreting the theological elements of Niebuhr's thought, and we will return to some of them in our last chapters on theological hope. For now, though, we are concerned primarily with the fourth category: the future as "a part of history as history has manifested itself in past and present experience", and from that statement we are really only concerned with the emphasis on experience. Drawing on what has been said in previous chapters and in similar fashion to Gilkey's outline of Niebuhr's theology of history, we are now in position to offer an outline of Niebuhr's moral interpretation of history. This can be divided into three categories, expressed existentially and pragmatically. First, Niebuhr believes that there is a transcendent source of moral meaning to life, which



is beyond the moral agent's comprehension of it, and separate from the agent's existence. In spite of the distance between the source of moral meaning and human existence, the source nevertheless impacts on human existence, as noted in chapter two. Second, moral and historical contexts change; so, too, does moral meaning. The source of moral meaning, however, does not. Of the three features of Niebuhr's moral interpretation of history, this one is most closely related to the concept of a natural moral law such as the one explored in chapter three. The difference is that in the version of the natural moral law that Niebuhr associates with Catholicism there is little room for the notion that moral meanings can change. Hence, Catholicism, like early Christianity, is bound to the primitive interpretations of Christian myths. Third, we can understand and interpret this meaning through appeals to previous experiences, either modifying our understanding of what we once interpreted to be the truth about goodness, or changing our interpretations of that truth altogether in light of new social and historical circumstances. This is what Lovin identifies as the "limited affirmation" of pragmatism by the mid-twentieth century theological realists, including Reinhold Niebuhr, who were seeking

a way to state their conviction that coherences tested by pragmatic methods may not exhaust the meaning of 'truth'....[For example,] [g]iven the beliefs and purposes I now share with others in my society, I may be entirely justified in believing that a certain pattern of behavior indicates a morally culpable moral weakness of character. People once believed this about certain forms of mental illness. Today, we are justified in believing that these episodes are the result of chemical events in the brain that are not subject to voluntary control by the individual who suffers from them. We do not, however, deal with this change in beliefs by saying that people are free to choose whichever explanation works best for them. Neither do we say that it used to be true that mental illness was a moral problem, but it isn't true anymore.<sup>17</sup>

The corollary between Gilkey's outline of Niebuhr's theological and historical vision and our framework for interpreting Niebuhr's moral understanding of history is in the fourth and third points, respectively: his point about history being manifest in "past and present experience" and our point concerning morally

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<sup>16</sup> Langdon Gilkey, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Theology of History", *The Journal of Religion* 54 (1974): 364-382.

<sup>17</sup> Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, pp. 51-52.

interpretive appeals to previous experiences. Both outlines, though, are attempts to shed light on Niebuhr's emphases for interpreting history, and while Gilkey is certainly correct that Niebuhr interpreted history in theological terms, the goal of this interpretation was to understand the meaning of history, which is derived from moral contexts. Thus, what our outline provides is a conceptual framework by which to understand how Niebuhr both understands the past and imagines new moral possibilities for the future. Remembering, imagining and interpreting past, future and present moral contexts are all part of the larger hermeneutical project, as we will now see.

#### 4.5. *Forms: Impertinent Predication*

"For Christian faith the world is neither perfect nor meaningless".<sup>18</sup>

Characteristically, Niebuhr phrases the intent of this statement in negative terms: if the world is not meaningless, it must be meaningful. The hermeneutical task of Christian realism, then, is to seek ways of understanding and interpreting the meaning of the world through its use of Christian symbols.

The concerns of hermeneutics are also epistemological concerns. It would be erroneous to offer moral interpretations of social contexts if the one who attempts such an interpretation does not first claim knowledge about the truths to be interpreted or the contexts under which they are to be considered. Of course, the knowledge to which the moral agent makes claims is relative, so the link between hermeneutics and epistemology is not absolute because, as Stout pointed out above, we can only assert those things that we are justified to believe. While the hermeneutical process is one that is bound to the epistemological process, it also stands independently of epistemology. Schweiker provides the foundations for understanding his hermeneutical realism which he defends as an attempt, similar to the one constructed in this chapter, "aimed at providing an interpretation of the *moral meaning* of Christian faith" by outlining three "forms" of epistemology which are unique to the hermeneutical process. These are empirical, logical and hermeneutical.<sup>19</sup> The variations of knowledge to which hermeneutical realism is linked—what we are warranted in asserting (hermeneutics) based on justified

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<sup>18</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "As Deceivers, Yet True" in *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938), p. 15.

statements of what we know to be the case (epistemology)—are expressed in their methods of validations. Empirical knowledge is validated through sensible experience. For example, we can claim empirical knowledge about something, say, the plant in our above example, based on the experiential wisdom we have gained through engaging the plant with our senses. Logical knowledge is attested to through analytical validation, which is closely related to empirical knowledge. That is, knowledge gained through sensible experience becomes logical knowledge when it is empirically analysed. Logical and empirical claims to knowledge face the similarly difficult, but necessary task of not reducing their respective interpretations of reality to universally determinative meanings of reality based on the unique perspectives of the moral agent involved in the process. This error ironically results in the charge of moral relativism with which methods of realistic interpretations are frequently charged. The obverse of such a reduction is what Schweiker identifies as part of the hermeneutical process in which “there can be the creation of meaning through the juxtaposition of logically and empirically distinct and even contradictory claims (“the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed”) where meaning arises from the virtual destruction of literal sense by impertinent predication”.<sup>20</sup> Schweiker is quick to emphasise that “[t]he non-reducibility of understanding to empirical and/or logical knowledge claims is crucial to sustain. I may “know,” for instance, that the sun is shining through my window, but that does not in itself determine its meaning for me or anyone else, or that I understand its possible range of meanings”.<sup>21</sup> Logical and empirical knowledge claims make necessary demands on the hermeneutical process, but they are only part of that process, and cannot be the apogee of meaning for any given statement about reality. For the Christian realist dependent on the structure of hermeneutical realism so far constructed, then, “these experiential and logical demands do not *determine* the meaning of Christian discourse [which *is* engaged in determining the meaning of history], because...the creation of meaning is often through impertinent predication, and in all cases understanding exceeds logical and

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<sup>19</sup> William Schweiker, “Comment”, *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 34.4 (2006): 712, 715, respectively.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 713.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*.

empirical conditions”.<sup>22</sup> In other words, for the Christian realist, the symbols of the Christian faith which constitute its discourse are interpreted as nothing more than symbols: meaningful, descriptive images that point to an objective truth about history which is otherwise indescribable.

Finally, hermeneutical knowledge is bound to the interpretation given to that knowledge. Perhaps it seems redundant to claim that our stated knowledge of reality is the result of our interpretation of that reality, but the point Schweiker is making is that when we claim knowledge of reality based on our interpretations of that reality, what we are really doing is claiming that our interpretations of reality are “disclosive” of meanings associated with the reality to which we cannot give full expression precisely because we do not possess full knowledge of those meanings or that reality in the first place. Thus, we see through a glass “darkly”. For methods of thinking such as Christian realism, this means that “[t]he disclosive power of Christian symbols, metaphors, parables, and narratives ground the properly public nature of Christian claims...”.<sup>23</sup> For Niebuhr’s understanding of Christian realism, then, the meaning of history is both disclosed and fulfilled in Jesus Christ.<sup>24</sup> So, when we see through a glass darkly, the person of Christ establishes the meaning of history (for Niebuhr, God’s sovereignty over history)<sup>25</sup> and promises to illuminate our faulty vision. “From the perspective of human history, which cannot be fully comprehended from its own perspective or fulfilled by its own power, the *wisdom* and the *power* in Christ is what gives life its meaning and guarantees the fulfilment of that meaning”.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 715. Note the difference Schweiker strikes between “determining” meaning and “creating” meaning.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 718.

<sup>24</sup> Niebuhr, in fact, devotes quite a bit of energy to explaining Christ’s role for determining the meaning of history. He notes that, “the disclosure of the character of God and the meaning of history in Christ has a threefold relation to the conceptions of the meaningfulness of history as established in historic cultures and their Messianic hopes. It (a) completes what is incomplete in their apprehensions of meaning; (b) it clarifies obscurities which threaten the sense of meaning; and (c) it finally corrects falsifications of meaning which human egoism introduces into the sense of meaning by reason of its effort to comprehend the whole of life from an inadequate centre of comprehension”. Niebuhr accepts this threefold pattern and also uses it to explain the role of the cross for determining the “ethical norm of history”. See *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. II, pp. 81-90. Additionally, see the second chapter of Vol. I, pp. 26-53, for the fuller discussion of Christ’s role in determining the meaning of history.

<sup>25</sup> “The sovereignty of God establishes the general frame of meaning for life and history, according to Biblical faith”. Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, p. 136. See also Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. II, pp. 35-38.

<sup>26</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. II, p. 55.



Of these three forms outlined above, Schweiker champions hermeneutical knowledge for his hermeneutical realism though, because of its interrelationship with the other two forms of knowledge, it is not as if hermeneutical knowledge can function independently of the others. That is, “[h]ermeneutics is linked but not reducible to empirical and logical knowledge”.<sup>27</sup> Here is a methodological disposition similar to that of Niebuhrian realism.

#### *4.6. Mimesis and Memory: A Caution*

Granting that Schweiker is not a Niebuhrian realist of the sort so far described and that Niebuhr himself never offered hermeneutical and epistemological categories in his articulation of Christian realism, we can nevertheless benefit from appropriating Schweiker’s categories for our present enquiries into Niebuhrian realism. To that end, the hermeneutical task of Christian realism is best described, like Schweiker’s hermeneutical realism, as an amalgamation of the three forms of knowing mentioned above. Before considering the implications of this hermeneutical realism for Christian realism, however, a potential source of error needs to be highlighted.

The assumption in Schweiker’s discussion of forms and validations is that the hermeneutical task of interpreting our present social contexts is accomplished through the recollection of past definitions of moral meaning. Thus, in Lovin’s example, one of the reasons we no longer assert that a person with mental disabilities is someone who exhibits a “moral weakness of character” is because we make appeals to consequences of past beliefs as corrective for present moral judgments. That is, we now realise that our past beliefs were false and led to the mistreatment of those who are mentally disabled. When what we once believed true proves to be false, or even pernicious, we can then say that we were wrong in our beliefs and set about correcting injustices resulting from our misjudgements. This is important because the past—particularly as it is interpreted in the forms of empirical and logical knowledge—serves as a plumb line against which to measure current moral judgments. Thus, we look to our past history to understand our present. So, any present interpretation of moral meaning that we may claim to possess is derivative of the experiences (sensibly and analytically validated) that we have had previously.

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<sup>27</sup> William Schweiker, “Comment”, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 34 (2006): 715.

The problem with this is that remembering the past can never simply be a mimetic exercise for determining present moral meaning. That is, the past as we once knew it only now exists in imagination and cannot be re-created in such a way that it can fully represent the reality it once did, the absolute and uninhibited nature of moral imagination notwithstanding. Attempts at such reconstructions are ultimately guilty of naïve sentimentality, one of the reasons for which Niebuhr was so critical of liberalism. Moral imagination, of course, works both regressively and progressively, which is to say that the imagination enables us to remember the past and envision the future; thus, its uninhibited nature. However, what happens when we emphasise the past as the foundation for present moral enquiry is that we get a sense of what it means for the Christian realist to “create” history. Gilkey seems to associate the creation of history in Niebuhrian realism with an atavism of the sort not easily identified with the Niebuhrian realist’s conception of history.<sup>28</sup> The task of creating history for the realist does not mean that the moral agent or society is capable freely to devise new socio-political contexts *ex nihilo*, dissociated from the contexts of the past. Nor, however, does it mean that the moral agent or society is bound indeterminately to those contexts. Instead, the task of creating history lies somewhere in between these two poles. Whether or not this is his intent, the implication of Gilkey’s categories is that the moral agent or society is indeed capable of the *ex nihilo* creation of history. The point of Niebuhr’s emphasis on human transcendence, particularly in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, though, is that we are never so far from our past mistakes as we would like to imagine, and so we cannot create utterly new forms of socio-political existence. Sin remains with us in all times of history.

The way that Niebuhr defines the creation of history is paradoxical. On the one hand, the moral agent—the creator of history—is powerful and free enough to imagine limitlessly into history’s uncreated future and thus to “create” new

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<sup>28</sup> Gilkey’s later work on this same topic seems to me a more plausible interpretation of Niebuhr’s conception of history. For example, Gilkey notes that in Niebuhr’s thought there are “layers” of Niebuhr’s understanding of history’s meaningfulness and that though “[m]eanings...exist in history, and there are renewals of these that avoid catastrophe and build further on the past...none of this is as final as its enthusiastic agents believe; none is ultimate, though it will claim to be so”. Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, pp. 210-211.

scenarios.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, however, this creative ability is never far from the capacity for destructiveness that haunts it. Thus, “the creative and destructive possibilities of human history are inextricably intermingled. The very power which organizes human society and establishes justice, also generates injustice by its preponderance of power”.<sup>30</sup> And elsewhere, “[t]he two-fold possibility of creativity and destruction in human freedom, accounts for the growth of both good and evil through the extension of human powers”.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, what incapacitates the human and leads to the negative potential for the “uncreation” (destruction) of meaning in history is anxiety over death. Just as preoccupation with the need to create a history which is meaningful, preoccupation (anxiety) with death is likewise concerned with meaning which could either be fulfilled or negated upon death. Thus,

[h]owever inexorable death may be as law of nature, the fear of death is just as inevitable an expression of that in man, which transcends nature. It proves that he does have “preeminence above a beast”; because the fear of death springs from the capacity not only to anticipate death but to imagine and to be anxious about some dimension of reality on the other side of death....The fear of death is thus the clearest embryonic expression of man’s capacity as a creator of history.<sup>32</sup>

The important thing to remember about Niebuhr’s understanding of the creation of history is that in it, the human stands atop a fulcrum between the past and future. Any attempts to create history—that is, to establish a meaningful history—must be related to such past attempts. This is precisely the point at which Niebuhrian realism is so tied to the pragmatic tradition.

#### 4.7. *Validations: Coherence and Niebuhrian Realism*

We have so far in this chapter discussed the methodology involved in interpreting the moral meaning of history. Schweiker’s presentation of hermeneutical realism offers empirical, logical and hermeneutical categories which we have used better to understand Niebuhr’s articulation of Christian realism for this

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<sup>29</sup> Power and freedom, for Niebuhr, are always related to the imagination, which is also the locus of destructive evil when the human tries to imagine beyond the natural bonds of human limitation. “Sin is, in short, the consequence of man’s inclination to usurp the prerogatives of God, to think more highly of himself than he ought to think, thus making destructive use of his freedom by not observing the limits to which a creaturely freedom is bound”. Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, p. 137.

<sup>30</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. II., p. 21.

<sup>31</sup> Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, p. 139.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8.

interpretation. Nevertheless, enquiry into, and interpretation of, moral meaning does not end with these categories. “That is to say, asserting that something is logically or empirically or hermeneutically true does not in itself show that the claim is actually true no matter who makes the assertion”.<sup>33</sup> In other words, what is important in hermeneutical realism is related to the question, mentioned above, about what we are warranted in asserting. As Lovin’s example highlights, it once seemed sufficient to claim that people suffered from mental disabilities because of moral weakness or culpability. One might even be able to imagine a scenario in which support for this claim is offered logically, empirically or hermeneutically. That does not, however, establish the truth of the claim. In fact, one can argue logically, empirically or hermeneutically precisely for the opposite, for the *untruth* of the claim. Here we have an example of the nature of knowledge’s incompleteness and its contingency on historical contexts. “Knowledge of the truth is thus invariably tainted with an “ideological” taint of interest, which makes our apprehension of truth something less than knowledge of *the* truth and reduces it to *our* truth”.<sup>34</sup> That is, all knowledge or attempts to derive knowledge are forever conditioned by certain attendant features that are beyond our control. This taint, in a nutshell, is precisely what Niebuhr constantly emphasises as the singular reason for why the meaning of history or claims to truth should not be handed over to a monolithic tradition. Given this, the question of any hermeneutical interpretation naturally shifts from one concerning what is involved in the process (i.e., “*What* are we doing when we interpret moral meaning?”) to one concerning the contexts involved in that interpretation (i.e., “*Who* is warranted in asserting interpretations of moral meaning?” And: “*What* are the conditions necessary for those interpretations to take place?”). Ultimately, questions about methodology, context and conditions all contribute to the larger question-at-hand: What gives an interpretation of moral meaning its validity? Here we have the link between Niebuhrian realism and pragmatism.

Niebuhr is not entirely clear about who is involved in his understanding of the process of moral interpretation and justification; or, at least he is not always specific about who is involved, or who validates the public search for a meaningful history. As we noted in the previous chapter, this has led several critics, particularly Stanley

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<sup>33</sup> Schweiker, “Comment”, p. 715.



Hauerwas, to criticise him for lacking a robust ecclesiology. It is precisely on this point where they think Niebuhr fails, because he does not offer an ecclesiological ethic in which the Christian Church speaks to the truth of God as revealed in the person of Christ to society-at-large. This, the critics say, results in Niebuhr's inability to offer a specific account of a Christian ethic, which is proven by "the fact that many of Niebuhr's contemporaries were attracted to his account of the human condition without sharing his theological convictions".<sup>35</sup> Of course, part of Niebuhr's hesitancy to point to the Church as the harbinger of moral goodness was stressed in the criticisms of Catholicism that we outlined in the last chapter. As we noted in that chapter, Niebuhr argues that the Church as a human institution is susceptible to the kinds of moral failure that any other human institution is. However, as I think Kenneth Durkin has rightly pointed out, this does not account for a failure on Niebuhr's part to provide an ecclesiology.<sup>36</sup>

These criticisms notwithstanding, we are not here offering an apologetic for Niebuhr's ecclesiology, and so are more concerned with the above question about what conditions are necessary in Niebuhr's articulation of Christian realism in order that interpretations of moral meaning may take place. For the sake of consistency, we will focus here only on the primary condition for these interpretations which, as those who have discussed Niebuhrian realism's relationship to pragmatism have pointed out, is coherence.

Whatever his dependence on the pragmatic tradition is, "Niebuhr was not altogether consistent in his statement of what the "pragmatism" in [his] "Christian pragmatism" means".<sup>37</sup> He defines it as "the application of Christian freedom and a sense of responsibility to the complex issues of economics and politics, with the firm resolve that inherited dogmas and generalizations will not be accepted no matter how revered or venerable, if they do not contribute to the establishment of justice in a

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<sup>34</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. II, p. 214.

<sup>35</sup> Kenneth Durkin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 182. This criticism (which is highlighted by Durkin, not offered by him) does seem to gloss the fact that Niebuhr still possesses theological convictions from which his understanding of Christian realism is derived, regardless of whether or not they were convincing to his contemporaries.

<sup>36</sup> See chapter three, n. 37.

<sup>37</sup> Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, p. 48, n. 39.

given situation".<sup>38</sup> What is consistent, though, is that, particularly when he speaks of the moral interpretation of history, Niebuhr is quick to emphasise the importance of coherence as a validation for any truthful interpretation.

Coherentist epistemological theories stress the importance of consistency in order for beliefs to be considered "true". Similarly, coherence in Niebuhr's articulation of Christian realism means "that religious beliefs and traditional dogmas lose their claim to validity and become literally meaningless if they are not coherent with our other ideas about the context in which we seek important human goods",<sup>39</sup> a statement which is exemplary of the distinctions between warranted assertability and epistemic justification.<sup>40</sup> This does not, however, portend nihilism or relativism, as some might fear. Instead,

[t]o require that doctrinal truths be coherent with the other beliefs by which we guide our choices and actions does not mean that theology cannot question scientific theories, political principles, or social scientific accounts of human action. To suggest that would be to give these other systems of belief the same unquestioned status that some theologians have mistakenly given to religious dogma....The point is rather that the beliefs which guide action are those by which we can coordinate all of our knowledge and experience...in pursuit of those larger aims that give direction to our life as a whole and link us in shared purposes with others.<sup>41</sup>

So, Niebuhr writes that "[w]e instinctively assume that there is only one world and that it is a cosmos, however veiled and unknown its ultimate coherences,

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<sup>38</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Theology and Political Thought in the Western World" in *Faith and Politics* ed. by Ronald Stone, (New York: George Braziller, 1968), p. 55. Cited in Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, p. 48, n. 39.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p. 49.

<sup>40</sup> There is a tricky nuance here, however, which Niebuhr's version of Christian realism (perhaps unknowingly) treads carefully. As Diggins points out, the original pragmatists were dubious about accounts of truth which held "the view that a law or principle exists independently of the knowing mind" (realism). Instead, "[t]o the pragmatist truth is never actual but potential, never total but partial and tentative. Whether a potentially true idea be regarded as whatever moves one from a state of doubt (Peirce) or as a volitional belief precipitating action (James) or as 'a plan of operation' that equips us to control the environment (Dewey), truth is not a property inherent in an idea but something that happens to an idea in the process of experiencing it. Ideas become true to the extent that they either "work efficiently and satisfactorily" (James), enable us to measure their practical consequences and "sensible effects" through scientific inquiry (Peirce), or provides us with "warranted assertability" with which we can act upon hypotheses and solve problems (Dewey). To be sure, there are distinctions in these definitions; yet they all share one premise: truth is not discovered but produced; it does not exist but comes into being, so to speak, in the act of knowing". See Diggins, p. 233. Obviously, Niebuhrian realism as it has so far been outlined does rely on this notion of truth that the pragmatists reject and believes that the truth of an idea, or the determination of moral meaning is validated through the testing of its premises, carried out in sensible experience.

incongruities, and contradictions in life, in history, and even nature...” and that “[i]n the one world there are many worlds, realms of meaning and coherence; and these are not easily brought into a single system...” but “[t]here must be a final congruity between these realms...”.<sup>42</sup> The point is that coherence cannot be coerced, but that it is also unavoidable, which is to suggest that any of our interpretations concerning the moral meaningfulness of history, if they are true, will not be replaced by other ideas which are not true. Sensible experience simply does not validate false interpretations of history’s moral meaning. However, just as he believes Catholicism obliterates moral meaning with its predetermined and closed system of natural law thinking, Niebuhr warns that though “[t]hings and events may be too unique to fit into any system of meaning...their uniqueness is destroyed by a premature coordination to a system of meaning, particularly a system which identifies meaning with rationality”.<sup>43</sup> It is Christology, I will argue in the penultimate chapter, which finally reconciles this incompleteness—transcendentally and immanently—for Niebuhr.

The consistent criticism of pragmatism is that because of its emphasis on the necessary consideration of the contexts in which moral judgements occur, the moral agent is too easily empowered with the ability to formulate any solution to moral problems that suits the prejudices of that agent. For example, if I want to assert that it is morally justifiable for me to bomb an abortion clinic, I may conceivably validate my assertion pragmatically by constructing a coherent appeal to the experiences of my fellow sensible citizens. I could argue publicly about the priority of unborn “rights” based on the experiences we all share (i.e., we have all been born, and thus were granted the “right” to be so); or, I might appeal to the emotions of others by attempting to evoke a sense of revulsion through media depicting aborted fetuses; or, I could characterise those who support abortion as ones who offend God’s ideal purpose for our lives. I may then suggest that the most effective means to end

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<sup>41</sup> Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, p. 49.

<sup>42</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Coherence, Incoherence, and Christian Faith” in *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, p. 176. Incoherence proves a foil to coherence, which results in the inexplicable phenomenon of evil. Niebuhr found radical evil—the idea that moral evil can actually be willed instead of being a privation of good—problematic. “Biblical faith has always insisted upon the embarrassing truth that the corruption of evil is at the heart of the human personality. It is not the inertia of its natural impulses in opposition to the purer impulses of the mind. The fact that it is a corruption which has a universal dominion over all men, though it is not by nature but in freedom that men sin, is the “mystery” of “original sin”, which will always be an offence to rationalists”. See *Faith and History*, p. 138.

abortion is to eliminate it at the source. In so doing, I justify my actions with a coherent argument based on appeals to shared experiences which some might even find morally unobjectionable. The problem, of course, is that I have bypassed the root issue of what I might find morally unacceptable about abortion; namely, that I have not named the moral meaning, or significance of the act of aborting a foetus. Instead, I have dealt only with adventitious concerns. Consequently, I have offered a too-simplistic account of moral reasoning, and I have sought to justify my means (the destruction of an abortion clinic) by appeals to my ends (the destruction of abortion as a practice). As we see, then, the moral judgement may too simply seek the answer most convenient to the moral agent involved. The justification of a particular interpretation of moral meaning can be offered less on the basis of what is logically, empirically and hermeneutically validated, and more on the basis of what suits the purposes of the agent formulating the justification so that the “ends justify the means” of the decision. This, of course, is a crude interpretation, reductively constructed and consequentially applied, but it is also consistent with the kinds of criticisms offered of Niebuhr’s Christian pragmatism.<sup>44</sup>

Russ Shafer-Landau notes that, “for non-reductive realists [a group in which we would want to include Niebuhr]...there is a standing presumption against any view that is irreducibly pluralistic. In every area of enquiry, philosophical or not, there is a powerful theoretical drive for simplicity. Faced with disparate phenomena, we seek to identify the smallest possible set of ultimate causes or explanations of the matters in question”.<sup>45</sup> Seeking out and articulating the simplest choice in moral judgement, however, is not the only alternative to an ethic which identifies and defines the respective multitudinous claims on our lives, though understandably, it is one of great appeal. As Lovin notes, “[t]he appeal of these non-naturalist alternatives [illustrated in the above example] is that they provide a simple single criterion by which to determine whether an act is right....No further investigation is required”.<sup>46</sup> The problem is that the straightforwardness involved in only having one

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Haas, p. 607, n. 5 where he lists David Little, James Childress, John Patrick Diggins, Colm McKeogh and Michael Joseph Smith as some of those who present this interpretation of Niebuhr’s realism.

<sup>45</sup> Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism*, p. 97.

<sup>46</sup> Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, p. 109.



option from which to choose does not, by that virtue alone, mean that the simplest (or singular) moral choice is always the right one. Life is not that tidy. Niebuhr's articulation of Christian realism, though, was neither "irreducibly pluralistic" nor naively simplistic. The kind of coherence involved in Niebuhr's version of Christian realism offers a vision of moral hermeneutics that attempts to navigate the myriad facets of our moral existence. "The appeal" of what Lovin identifies as "coherentist ethical naturalism" which he attaches to Christian realism, "is not that it eliminates moral disagreements, but that it suggests a way to resolve them".<sup>47</sup>

This is an important point, particularly as it pertains to the kinds of pluralistic contexts more prevalent today than during Niebuhr's life. In some sense, because of his insistence on the need to consider all relevant perspectives and still to resolve moral disagreements, Niebuhr anticipated twenty-first century Western pluralism in liberal societies in a way that today lends credence to the appellation "prophetic" before Niebuhrian realism.

#### *4.8. Pragmatism with Foundations*

It is beyond the extent of the present project to outline the particular distinctions which make up the trajectory of pragmatism. However, it is worth acknowledging that many pragmatists do not maintain the same kind of conceptual framework about the nature of reality that we have to this point associated with Niebuhrian realism, nor would they be likely to be persuaded by Schweiker's hermeneutical realism. Richard Rorty, most notably, dashes the realist metaphysic against the rocks of linguistic meaning. He offers a tripartite definition of pragmatism which, roughly summarised goes: first "pragmatism...is simply anti-essentialism applied to notions like 'truth,' 'knowledge,' 'language,' 'morality,' and similar objects of philosophical theorizing". The second defining characteristic is that pragmatism holds "no epistemological difference between truth about what ought to be and truth about what is, nor any metaphysical difference between facts and values, nor any methodological difference between morality and science". Finally, pragmatism "is the doctrine that there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones—no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, or of the mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints provided by

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

the remarks of our fellow-inquirers". More to the point, the pragmatist "wants us to give up the notion that God, or evolution, or some other underwriter of our present world-picture, has programmed us as machines for accurate verbal picturing...".<sup>48</sup> It is this third point which Rorty finds most compatible with an accurate philosophical construal of pragmatism. Thus, he finds realism philosophically incapable of offering a viable contribution to the conversation that pragmatists are having because of its reliance on conceptual frameworks which support the objectivity of moral truth.

We could say, though, that Niebuhr also wants us to give up that same notion that there is a universal "underwriter" who programmes us for moral response. Especially as we have tried here to reinforce the ideas from the last chapter, Niebuhr is disinterested in an ethic in which moral agents are "programmed" for anything, as he thinks is articulated by pre-Vatican II Catholic natural moral law theology. This, however, does not require that such an ethic relinquishes the idea that God *is* the underwriter of the moral meaning of history. Instead, it enforces Niebuhr's aversion to the singularity in systems of ethics whose meaning is predetermined and, thus, pre-closed.

David Fergusson, who has offered a helpful interpretation of moral realism, has addressed Rorty's characterisation of moral pragmatism and found it lacking for reasons of a similar nature than those mentioned above. Fergusson offers three criticisms: First, based on Rorty's depiction of pragmatists, there is no room for the "moral dissident" to challenge the status quo of moral hermeneutics. "If moral truth is to be defined pragmatically in terms of what the community finds useful or convenient, how can we make sense of those who confront society with a moral alternative"?<sup>49</sup> By offering pragmatism as a moral alternative, but constructing it in terms which do not allow other moral alternatives to be offered, Rorty's depiction of pragmatism runs into the problem of self-referential coherence, which, as Fergusson notes in his second point, "...attends Rorty's reading of the history of philosophy. If

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<sup>48</sup> Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972-1980)*, (Brighton: The Harvester Press Limited, 1982), pp. 162-165.

<sup>49</sup> David Fergusson, *Community, Liberalism and Christian Ethics*, p. 104. Fergusson does note Rorty's insistence that "the moral dissident is one who confronts society with the ideal of liberalism over against the shortcomings of the status quo. [Therefore] [i]t is essential to a liberal society that it provide its poets and revolutionaries with the space in which to challenge conventional wisdom and practice".

[Rorty's analysis of pragmatism] is presented as a true and objective account of what has happened, it is hard to see how Rorty is not commending his position in a manner that it judges impossible".<sup>50</sup> In other words, pragmatism, defined by Rorty, cannot be presented objectively without first ridding itself of its chief component: commitment to the non-objectivity of moral enquiry and truth. Fergusson's third criticism is similar:

To describe our predicament in terms of being trapped inside our conceptual scheme with no access to the independent world is to misrepresent our true position....[A]lthough there is no pure language of morals which infallibly represents ethical truths independently of historical context, this does not undermine the realist's case....[T]he fact that we can only talk about ethics in terms of a particular, culturally bound vocabulary, does not imply that we are not talking about something beyond our own culturally conditioned preferences.<sup>51</sup>

What Fergusson believes Rorty's position necessarily leads to is relativism of the sort that realism attempts to avoid.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, Fergusson sees positive elements in moral pragmatism, and wants to endorse a pragmatism which does not abandon moral realism.

What, then, is required to answer these problems presented by Rorty's characterisation of pragmatism? It seems that both realists and pragmatists are searching for an interpretive ethic which can negotiate the impulse toward an ideology in which the moral meaning of history is closed to enquiry that has not been programmed on the one hand, and one which relativises ethics in such a way that no

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, p. 105.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 106-7.

<sup>52</sup> Pragmatism also attempts to avoid relativism, and it should be noted that Rorty is quick to argue against relativism and the notion that just because one does not accept a framework in which moral meaning is held objectively apart from human conceptions about it that such a person can legitimately be called a "relativist". "The philosophers who get called 'relativists' are those who say that the grounds for choosing between such opinions are less algorithmic than had been thought. Thus one may be attacked as a relativist for holding that familiarity of terminology is a criterion of theory-choice in physical science, or that coherence with the institutions of the surviving parliamentary democracies is a criterion in social philosophy. When such criteria are invoked, critics say that the resulting philosophical position assumes an unjustified primacy for 'our conceptual framework,' or our purposes, or our institutions. The position in question is criticized for not having done what philosophers are employed to do: explain why our framework, or culture, or interests, or language, or whatever, is at last on the right track—in touch with physical reality, or the moral law, or the real numbers, or some other sort of object patiently waiting about to be copied. So the real issue is not between people who think one view as good as another and people who do not. It is between those who think our culture, or purpose, or institutions cannot be supported except conversationally, and people who still hope for other sorts of support". See Rorty, pp. 166-167.

system or moral meaning of history exists from the beginning on the other. In other words, pragmatism and realism are tenably and mutually sustainable conceptions of moral meaning when one utilises the insights of the other without recourse to caricature in consideration of either one of them.

Niebuhr provides this sort of interpretive ethic in his articulation of Christian realism with its incorporation of both realistic and pragmatic elements. That is, Niebuhrian realism offers a realistic reading of the moral meaning of history which transcends human existence, and provides a pragmatic appraisal of moral interpretation which appreciates the significance of language (particularly as it pertains to impertinent predication and the symbols of the Christian tradition) as determinative of our interpretations of moral meaning.<sup>53</sup> In this sense, Niebuhr's Christian realism points to pragmatism *with* foundations. Regarding this kind of pragmatism, Joseph Margolis offers a definition of realism and relativism (used non-pejoratively) that seems useful for the Niebuhrian realist. Says Margolis:

Relativism is an empirically motivated thesis to the effect that, in particular sectors of inquiry, it is methodologically advisable to retreat from insisting on a strong bipolar model of truth and falsity, while not denying that the affected propositions or claims *are* genuinely such and, as such, are to be ascribed suitable truth-like values....[R]elativism is not only not opposed to realism, but its advocates are positively committed to realism....<sup>54</sup>

Nevertheless, Niebuhr is also mindful of the mysterious nature of human and divine existence, and finds parts of existential thinking useful for understanding our

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<sup>53</sup> Richard Fox argues that though John Dewey is frequently thought of as the pragmatist with whom Niebuhr has the least in common, there are actually significant links between the two thinkers. He points especially to how "[w]hat Niebuhr's analysis [of Dewey] actually revealed, was how close his own prophetic faith was to Dewey....His starting point, like Dewey's, was man's drive for meaning and his quest to realize ideals in history". See Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 165. Bruce Kuklick accepts this idea, but also points out that he "would add that Niebuhr was able to be a formidable enemy of Dewey because he couched his 'similar' ideas' in language that reflected a more complex view of man and of the potential of science". See Bruce Kuklick, "Dewey, American Theology, and Scientific Politics" *Religion and Twentieth-Century American Intellectual Life* ed. by Michael J. Lacey, p. 92. Kuklick has an interesting point here and, though it exceeds the boundaries of what I am attempting to accomplish in this chapter, it is worth noting because it points to the use of language as another link between Niebuhr's version of Christian realism and philosophical pragmatism. At the very least, this could be the basis for a future avenue of research, locating the two thinkers in pluralistic contexts. To that end, Jerome Paul Soneson's work on Dewey and theology could prove a useful conversation partner. See Jerome Paul Soneson, *Pragmatism and Pluralism: John Dewey's Significance for Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

<sup>54</sup> Joseph Margolis, *Pragmatism Without Foundations: Reconciling Realism and Relativism*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1986), p. 111.



contexts of existence. Using our understandings of hermeneutical realism and pragmatism up to this point will help us as we now move on to explore the concept of existentiality, which will occupy the remainder of this chapter.

## **Part II—Meaning: The “What” of the Method**

### *4.9. Christian Realism and Existentialism*

If Niebuhr’s interpretation of the moral meaning of history is similar to hermeneutical realism and influenced by pragmatism, it may seem natural to tie this conception to existentialist thought, because of shared emphases on the discernment of moral meaning and reluctance to derive meaning from any system of pre-closed thinking applied to human existence. It may, however, seem disadvantageous to associate Niebuhr’s articulation of Christian realism with pragmatism or existentialism because neither of these requires the same theological metaphysic that Niebuhr’s realism does in order for their interpretations of the moral meaning of history to be sustainable. Nevertheless, it is apropos to the current of our discussion so far next to discuss the existential elements in Niebuhrian realism because it was after the foundations of Christian pragmatism were established that Niebuhr’s theological thinking, existential in conception, began to become more apparent. “From now on [after Christian pragmatism]”, notes Cornel West, “[Niebuhr] would focus first and foremost on the development of a Christian mythology that engaged the social but proceeded from the aspirations, responsibility, and anxieties of the self. In short, he decided to take Christian theology seriously—or at least as seriously as a Christian pragmatist can”.<sup>55</sup> The doubtful nature of this last sentence notwithstanding,<sup>56</sup> the point still stands: Niebuhr’s most profound theological

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<sup>55</sup> West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, p. 159.

<sup>56</sup> It seems fairly clear that Niebuhr always took theology seriously, though he was never entirely comfortable with the label “theologian”. He admits as much when he says, “I have never been very competent in the nice points of pure theology; and I must confess that I have not been sufficiently interested heretofore to acquire the competence”. See *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, Kegley and Bretall (eds.), p. 3. Some critics point to this as empirical evidence not of a statement of humility, but for the insufficient and “un-Christian” nature of Niebuhr’s theology. See, for example, Hauerwas, p. 114, n. 2, in which he notes that “Niebuhr’s self-assessment is correct, but also misleading. His declaration that he is not competent in the ‘nice points of pure theology’ is but an indication that he assumes the ‘nice points of pure theology’ are Jamesian over-beliefs that cannot be true or false”.

analyses come at a time in his life when the influence of existentialism is proportionately evident.<sup>57</sup>

We have discussed already the distinctions and similarities between pragmatism and Christian realism. The task at hand is now to demonstrate a similar alliance between this realism and existentialism. We will begin that undertaking by looking a piece addressing existentialism in Niebuhrian realism to date, to which we now turn.

#### 4.9.1. Ramsey on Niebuhr's Existentialism

The most important and sustained account which relates existentialism and Niebuhrian realism is Paul Ramsey's essay, "Love and Law".<sup>58</sup> There Ramsey draws on the tradition of natural law thinking to structure his argument, and it will be worth our while to identify five key points in each of these parts in order better to understand the overall argument. Consideration of Ramsey's arguments is important because his analysis of Niebuhr's thought appropriately situates Niebuhr as an existentialist and as someone who is reliant on natural law thinking.

First, Ramsey identifies Sartre with the natural moral law tradition and then Niebuhr with Sartre (and, consequently, with the natural moral law tradition). Sartre, says Ramsey, intends to split from the natural moral law tradition, but is never finally able to complete the schism precisely because his existentialism is dependent upon an essentialist metaphysical conception similar to that of the natural moral law tradition. Sartre argues that individuals draw on no predetermined nature for their existences *qua* individuals, and so determine their own existences through the exercise of choice (*opto ergo sum*), which is part and parcel to human self-understanding. "[T]here is no explaining things away (or, dropping out that last pejorative word, there is no explaining things) by reference to a fixed and given human nature".<sup>59</sup> Ramsey summarises this by stating that "[c]hoice creates value and

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<sup>57</sup> I would locate Niebuhr's most important theological and existential works from the late 1940s onward. Obviously *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1939) still serves as the magnum opus, but many other important works came after this time which develop and elucidate the themes begun in these two volumes (including the moral meaning of history, the self and its place in history and the idea of a nature intrinsic to humans). This list includes, but is not limited to *Faith and History* (1949), *The Self and the Dramas of History* (1956) and *Man's Nature and His Communities* (1966).

<sup>58</sup> Paul Ramsey, "Love and Law", in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, pp. 80-123. This essay also appears in Ramsey's later *Nine Modern Moralists* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1962), pp. 111-147.

<sup>59</sup> Ramsey, "Love and Law", p. 81. Inter-textual note Ramsey's.

essence. There is no pre-existent value or essence or structure of reality of God which justifies choice; and it would be fruitless to try to justify by a value the action which alone creates value. Man is a free, self manufacturing being...".<sup>60</sup> History, or at least the moral meaning of individual histories, is the product of what each individual creates of it based on the choices he or she makes; a truly atavistic conception of "creating" history. The problem, as Ramsey points out, is that Sartre cannot escape the essentialist conception of human nature he intends to escape, because that essentialism is necessary for him to make such a statement. "To think at all about the nature of man Sartre must think with essences, even if that be only the thought that man essentially consists of an entirely dynamic and limitless freedom. However radically reshaped, here surely there is a modicum of the natural law".<sup>61</sup>

This is the point at which Ramsey links Niebuhr to Sartre and the natural moral law. In fact, Ramsey claims that the link with the natural moral law tradition is even stronger for Niebuhr than it is for Sartre. Highlighting Niebuhr's emphasis on the law of love as a kind of "natural law", Ramsey notes that

love is the moral law for man...[Niebuhr's] way of pointing us to this conclusion is by showing that the natural moral law elaborated in the philosophies of naturalism, rationalism, and so on, fails and must fail to captivate and fulfil the special dimension of freedom in man's essential nature....[W]hat can be more grounded in "Nature" than [Niebuhr's] assertion that man is made for life-in-community whose quality is love?<sup>62</sup>

Second, Ramsey attempts to establish more clearly the issues involved with linking Niebuhr's realism to the natural moral law tradition, thus locating him farther from an existential conception of human nature than Niebuhr believes himself to be. However, Ramsey turns on this point and suggests instead that Niebuhr might actually provide a version of existentialism, but that Niebuhr does not realise this because of his attempt to modify the natural law tradition. Ramsey draws primarily on Niebuhr's redefinition of the natural law as the law of love, and suggests that what we have in Niebuhr's Christian realism is not, in the end, the natural law,

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

because the law of love for Niebuhr is inextricable from the notion that there are variable norms of human nature. "One step in the direction of properly grasping Niebuhr's thought is to understand love as the natural law for freedom. Another is to understand that what he often calls natural law, or its equivalent in his thought, is not that at all, but an application of the fundamental law of love".<sup>63</sup> That is, to Ramsey's mind, Niebuhr confuses traditional conceptions of the natural law for the law of love to which Niebuhr appeals.

Third, Ramsey revisits the division between the *jus Gentium* and *jus Civilis* in Niebuhr's thought that is outlined most extensively in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*.<sup>64</sup> Ramsey offers criticisms of Niebuhr that are similar to those of John Milbank particularly as they relate Niebuhrian realism to Stoic conceptions of the natural law. Because these criticisms are addressed at length in the following chapter, it is sufficient simply to note Ramsey's use of them here.

Ramsey's fourth and fifth points are his most important, and therefore importantly linked to one another. He first discusses the notion of sacrificial, agapeic love in Niebuhr's conception of Christian realism and relates it to the natural moral law tradition. In fact, Ramsey highlights that agape *is* the natural moral law, the "ought" to which the moral agent is drawn, and the chief component for understanding the moral meaning of history. This naturally leads to the question of *how* the moral agent knows "that love is the norm for human life in freedom".<sup>65</sup> Ramsey poses three possibilities for answering this question: First, "[i]t may be that man has an "inchoate" knowledge of the requirement of *self-sacrificial* love, or that he dimly knows that he should heed not his own but his neighbor's good". Second, "[i]t may be that in his free spiritual self-awareness man has a sense of *mutual* love, and that only by faith in Christ does he know himself to be judged in terms of the *self-giving* love which seeks to save him at such cost". Third, "[i]t is simply love that is known as the norm for human existence in the moment of self-transcendence and self-understanding".<sup>66</sup>

Ramsey's essay is important because it draws attention to the influence of existentialism on Niebuhr's realism. At the same time, however, it points out that

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<sup>63</sup> Ramsey, "Love and Law", p. 93.

<sup>64</sup> Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, pp. 103-135.

<sup>65</sup> Ramsey, "Love and Law", p. 114.



because Niebuhr is so concerned to distance himself from the tradition of the natural moral law (pre-Vatican II), he never realises just how close to that tradition he actually is. Consequently, the essay signifies the fact that there are essentialist *and* existentialist ways of thinking at work in Niebuhr's realism. As we will see in our final chapters, this is crucial to understanding how the framework of Niebuhr's realism provides a foundation for theological hope.

Putting the point on his argument, Ramsey thus suggests that from the above list, the second possibility for interpreting Niebuhr's conception of love is most appropriate. Interestingly, he never ties this conceptual possibility to the part of human nature responsible for its possibility in the first place, though one could plausibly suggest that it is implicit in his argument. This, I suggest, is the place of the conscience in moral agency, an area largely unexplored in Niebuhrian studies. Before closing this chapter, let us focus for a moment on the role the conscience plays in Niebuhr's realism for the determination of the moral meaning of history.

#### *4.10. Conscience and Moral Hermeneutics*

Moral agents are compelled to act for justice when they sense that "things are not as they ought to be". This sense, which may rightly be called the conscience, is intrinsic to the discernment of history's moral meaning. Throughout his writings, Niebuhr attends to the notion that the role of conscience is significant for the discernment of history's moral meaning, but he is careful not to ascribe too crude an appraisal to what the conscience is, or what kind of roles it plays. For Niebuhr the conscience is not merely an "intuition" or "feeling" aroused by some sense of moral dissatisfaction with our social contexts as we understand them. Human existence is not so formulaic that moral hermeneutics may always identify one good, two evils or three injustices in any given social context. For Niebuhr this means that "the content of conscience is much more relative than the proponents of the idea of 'moral intuitions' realize".<sup>67</sup> Part of the problem with intuitionism, as Niebuhr understands it, is that it too easily champions the significance of the moral agent's reason, as in the natural moral law tradition. As Lovin notes, "[f]or the intuitionist, the fact that so often we "just know" that an act is wrong suggests that these moral aspects of

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 140-146.

<sup>67</sup> "Rational, Moral and Religious Norms" in *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics*, p. 125. See also Brink, p. 109.

experience are unique properties of actions and situations, not [as in Niebuhr's realism] discerned by examining and drawing conclusions about natural properties".<sup>68</sup> The problem, in other words, is that the intuition that something is wrong may be nothing more than a feeling of unease, and moral discernment cannot be made on the basis of feeling at the expense of examination of the facts at hand.

While the conscience is not merely a feeling, neither is it some uncorrupted element of human life which exists independently of human existence. The ideal function of the conscience is to serve the individual in her transcendence and provide for her a sense of compunction concerning things which are not as they ought to be. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the individual's sense of compunction necessarily conforms rightly to moral goodness discerned by reason. Instead, as reason is corruptible, so is the conscience, and so the guilt often associated with the conscience can be false guilt.

In sum, Niebuhr thinks of the conscience not simply as intuition, nor as a part of human nature that, when discerned, will help the moral agent rightly order his or her desires. Instead, for Niebuhr, the conscience is

any aspect of the self's judging its actions and attitudes in which a sense of obligation in contrast to inclination is expressed. Many efforts have been made to deny the reality of such a sense of 'ought'. Most of these efforts are clearly derived from one-dimensional views of selfhood, usually elaborated within a naturalistic ontology. They try to eliminate the distinction between the desired and the desirable in the view of the self. But they fail to explain why the self is under the necessity of seeking what it desires by proving that the desired is really desirable; or that what the self wants is in accord with some wider system of values than the self's own interests....This sense of obligation is powerful enough to allow the self freedom to achieve what it desires only when it is able to persuade itself that what it desires is consonant with this more general system of values.<sup>69</sup>

Having sketched Niebuhr's basic conception of what the conscience is not, I will now suggest two ways in which Niebuhr understands the conscience as central to the process of moral hermeneutics: the easy and uneasy conscience; and, the individual conscience.

#### *4.10.1. The Easy and Uneasy Conscience*

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<sup>68</sup> Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, p. 108.

<sup>69</sup> Niebuhr, *The Self and the Dramas of History*, pp. 25-26.

The first category to consider for Niebuhr's understanding of the conscience is the distinction he draws between "easy" and "uneasy" conscience. The easy conscience is not a conscience which glosses the problem of sin, or denies the reality of sin; it is the ideal conscience. One with an easy conscience possesses a moral disposition which believes the self to conform to the moral order of the universe instituted by God. This disposition asks whether or not "...man's historical existence is such that he can ever, by any discipline of reason or by any merit of grace, confront a divine judgment upon his life with an easy conscience. If he can it means that it is possible for a will centred in an individual ego to be brought into essential conformity with the will and power which governs all things".<sup>70</sup> The easy conscience is the conscience of legalism that does not acknowledge the relativities of human existence.<sup>71</sup>

On the other hand, the uneasy conscience is the conscience that instils in the moral agent the sense that things are not as they should be. Niebuhr thinks of the uneasy conscience as the most suitable description of a realistic understanding of the conscience because it neither shirks engagement with the complexities of existence, nor does it seek to pre-close the mysteries of this existence into one system of meaning. Moreover, it points to the collective nature of human existence because the conscience is made uneasy at the point when it considers the injustices afflicting others to whom the individual is socially related. "The need of this neighbour, the demands of that social situation, the claims of this life upon me, unrecognized today may be recognized and stir the conscience to uneasiness tomorrow".<sup>72</sup> In a sense, the uneasy conscience is more socially conscious than that of the easy conscience. However, the uneasy conscience always points back to the individual moral agent. Though certain systems of injustice or oppression may inspire in me a desire to act on behalf of those who suffer, and though this act may be related to the final law of agapeic suffering, it is still I who acts. This brings us to the second important conception of the conscience for Niebuhr.

#### 4.10.2. *The Individual Conscience*

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<sup>70</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. II, p. 141. It should be noted that Niebuhr is here criticising the idea of an easy conscience and associates it with Catholic conceptions of the moral law.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, p. 190, n. 11.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*.

The second way to interpret Niebuhr's understanding of the conscience is individualistically. Though Niebuhr addresses the idea of a "collective" conscience in his earlier writings,<sup>73</sup> later writings tend more often to deal with the subject of conscience of the individual who stands in judgment before God for not being the person God has called him or her to be. For example, Niebuhr notes that "[i]t is the highest function of religion to create a sense of guilt, to make man conscious of the fact that his inadequacies are more than excusable limitations—that they are treasons against his better self. It accomplishes this task by revealing sin as a treason against God".<sup>74</sup>

Interest in the individual conscience in his postwar writings is, I suggest, related to three separate influences. First, interest in the individual conscience is linked to his interest in existentialism which is more apparent in his later writings. As previously noted, Niebuhr devotes a significant amount of time in these later writings to the concept of the individual person. It is not coincidental, then, that those writings which deal most explicitly with the themes of existentialism are the same ones which deal with the theme of the individual conscience.<sup>75</sup>

Second, it should also be noted that during this second half of his professional life, Niebuhr's writings show increasing interest in contemporary psychoanalysis. He engaged on a fairly regular basis with the leading proponents of psychoanalysis (e.g. Fromm, Erickson, Jung, Freud), interactions which certainly contributed to his interest in the subject of the individual conscience.<sup>76</sup>

Third, and perhaps most significantly, the interplay and influence of H. Richard Niebuhr's ideas on Reinhold's thought plays a considerable role in the older Niebuhr's later writings on the individual conscience. Each brother has conceptual elements of the individual self in his respective interpretations of the conscience which are akin to the other. There are, however, subtle and comparable differences

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<sup>73</sup> Cf., Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, pp. 257-277.

<sup>74</sup> Niebuhr, "Barthianism and the Kingdom" in *Essays in Applied Christianity*, p. 143.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Niebuhr, *The Self and the Dramas of History*, pp. 15-84.

<sup>76</sup> For more on this interest in psychoanalysis, see Halliwell's chapter, "Digging About in the Slime: Niebuhr and American Psychoanalysis", in *The Constant Dialogue*, pp. 131-159. Halliwell does not explicitly link Niebuhr's growing interest in psychoanalysis to his writings on the individual conscience, but he does note that Niebuhr's concept of the self is developed largely in conversation with Freudian psychoanalysis, and that his subsequent understanding of the conscience is borne out of his understanding of the conceptual "self". "Rather than being entirely self-centered on Freud's



between the two thinkers, especially with respect to their responses on the issue of what it is that the moral agent is responding to when he or she is prompted by what the conscience.

Both H. Richard and Reinhold conceive of the self first as an individual, but ultimately as an individual related to other individuals at the level of community. For example, in *Man's Nature and His Communities*, the work in which Reinhold seeks to correct previous defects he perceives from his thought during the previous decades, he suggests that a realist understanding of the individual's nature is that the self first thinks of itself. When it does so, the freedom of the individual is emphasised to the detriment of the community in which the individual lives. As Reinhold Niebuhr notes, "Realists emphasise the disruptive effect of human freedom on the community". Later he notes that "the Christian faith holds that human nature contains both self-regarding and social impulses and that the former is stronger than the latter. This assumption is the basis of Christian realism".<sup>77</sup> The significance of this last statement cannot be overstressed because it encapsulates a central idea of Niebuhr's realism which I have so far attempted to demonstrate the importance of throughout our chapters: the human individual is the starting point for moral and theological discourse. Moreover, this understanding of the individual self points to the paradox that because the self regards both itself and the community, it must therefore seek "the establishment of a tolerable harmony between self-regarding individuals within the civil community, and the relations of integral political communities each other".<sup>78</sup> Niebuhr understands the proclivity for the self to regard itself over others as sinful, a sinfulness to which the conscience points when the individual senses that things are not as they ought to be. The conscience is central to human freedom. We might even say that just as justice and equality serve as regulative principles for the law of love in Niebuhr's articulation of Christian realism, so also the conscience serves as the regulative principle of freedom. That is, the conscience reminds individuals that they are never as free as they imagine themselves to be, but it paradoxically frees individuals better to discern the moral meaning of history.

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model of the superego...Niebuhr believed that the conscience had the capacity to take the self beyond itself...". See *Ibid*, p. 140.

<sup>77</sup> Niebuhr, *Man's Nature and His Communities*, pp. 22, 28.

H. Richard Niebuhr agrees that the individual self is related to other selves whose existence naturally constitutes community. "To be a self in the presence of other selves", he says, "is not a derivative experience but primordial. To be able to say that I am I is not an inference from the statement that I think thoughts nor from the statement that I have a law-acknowledging conscience. It is, rather, the acknowledgement of my existence as the counterpart of another self".<sup>79</sup> Drawing on this, he suggests that when the self responds to the conscience, it is responding to an external moral law which compels it to understand that things are not as they ought to be. But the failure to live by this moral law is made evident because of the presence of others. Like Reinhold, H. Richard holds to a version of the natural moral law for understanding how we discern the moral meaning of history. "We must agree with the prophets who always presupposed that Israel knew what was good, and with St. Paul who believed that the Gentiles who knew not God had knowledge of his law in their conscience".<sup>80</sup> In other words, H. Richards agrees with the point of the examples, contained in both the Old and New Testaments, which says that the conscience is adjudicated by a law of the "good". The discernment of this law, he thinks, is given over in the act of God's revelation. That is, "[t]he moral law is changed...by the revelation of God's self in that its evermore extensive and intensive application becomes necessary".<sup>81</sup>

Granting that H. Richard gives a more robust interpretation than Reinhold does of the doctrine of revelation as that which completes the knowledge of the moral law "written" in the conscience, the comparison still stands: both thinkers identify the self's conscience as that which responds to an external moral authority which exists independently of human conceptions about it, and they agree that while the conscience responds to this authority, it is discerned in the exigencies of historical contexts. As such, moral hermeneutics can never be merely individualistic. For Reinhold, then, "[m]an lives in nature, yet transcends nature, and builds history in his communities, and then he transcends these communities of

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, p. 28.

<sup>79</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1963), p. 71.

<sup>80</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), p. 85.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, p. 87.

history and has his own conscience, whereby he can judge the historical situation. Finally, looking higher to a more transcendent level, he feels himself subject to an ultimate judgment".<sup>82</sup> However, "...notions of conscience as purely individual do not do justice to the fact that the individual is best able to defy a community when his conscience is informed and reinforced by another community which directly impinges upon his life and threatens his liberty by its coercions...".<sup>83</sup> In other words, the individual is never as free as she believes herself to be because as an individual, she stands under a more ultimate judgment of the external community in which she resides. Moreover, all communities stand under the final judgment of God who transcends history. Here is the paradox of history's meaning: because we sense that things are not as they ought to be, we say that there must be something which can set aright our current injustices. But the Christian realist acknowledges that we are incapable of completing the incompleteness of history's meaning. This leads to the existential dilemma: history's meaning is only made complete by the law of love in Christ, which transcends history. However, the fulfilment of meaning in history does not remain elusive in historical contexts; it is related to the two-fold nature of the law of love embodied in Christ. This is a complicated point in Niebuhr's interpretation of historical meaning, related to his Christology, and we will turn to a fuller exposition of Christ as the symbol of the moral meaning of history in chapter six. For now, though, it is sufficient to mention that Niebuhr's interpretation of the moral meaning of history is indivisible from his Christology, apprehended by the individual conscience.

#### 4.11. Conclusions

History's meaning, hidden and paradoxical to the perennial unrest of human existence, stands beyond our comprehension of it. Sin proves a foil to our efforts to interpret the meaningfulness of human existence and uncertainty about our futures provides the basis of anxiety inbuilt to human nature.

We have seen in this chapter that Schweiker's hermeneutical realism provides an interpretive tool for attempts to interpret the meaning of history that cannot be fully known in the particularity of our social existences. Moreover,

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<sup>82</sup> "The Burden of Conscience" in *Justice and Mercy*, edited by Ursula M. Niebuhr, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1974), p. 106.

<sup>83</sup> Niebuhr, *The Self and the Dramas of History*, p. 27.

Schweiker's presentation of hermeneutical realism offers a helpful interlocutor for comprehending the hermeneutics of Niebuhr's realism. Hermeneutical realism seeks primarily to understand what beliefs we are justified in believing and are thus warranted in asserting. We have also observed here that existentialist thought is important to hermeneutical strategies such as realism which seek to interpret history's meaning from the social contexts in which we live. More specifically, existentialism is important for understanding the individual's conscience which instils the sense that things are not as they ought to be.

In the next chapter we will consider John Milbank's assessment of Niebuhr's realism and the problems he finds in it. Milbank's criticism deals with several of the metaphysical and hermeneutical concerns that we have covered to this point, and it presents the foundations of Niebuhr's realism as those which essentially offer a hopeless ethic. It is therefore helpful to consider Milbank's interpretation of Niebuhr before moving on to our chapters on theological hope.



## Chapter Five

### MORAL LAW, PRIVATIVE EVIL AND CHRISTIAN REALISM

#### 5.1 Abstract

This chapter responds to John Milbank's essay, "The Poverty of Niebuhrianism" in *The Word Made Strange*. There Milbank offers a critique of Niebuhr's Christian realism for offering an attenuated Stoic naturalism, and a theologically inadequate conception of original sin, rather than a genuine Christian realism. Drawing on the previous enquiries of previous chapters into the framework of Christian realism, its relationship to the natural moral law and the hermeneutics of Christian realism, I will here argue that while Milbank rightly perceives a kind of naturalism in Niebuhrian realism, he inaccurately identifies it as Stoic. Moreover, I will argue that Milbank and Niebuhr are more aligned on the concept of original sin than Milbank allows, particularly when the reader considers Milbank's later work, *Being Reconciled*, and Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny of Man and Faith and History*.

#### 5.2. Introduction

It has been a decade since John Milbank published the second instalment of his project of theological engagement with the social sciences. This work, *The Word Made Strange*, seeks to expand and clarify themes originally outlined in Milbank's first installation, *Theology and Social Theory*. In *The Word Made Strange*, Milbank's clarifications of his original themes are delivered in essays devoted to such topics as ethics, politics, theology, and linguistics. Though I will not here seek to comment on all of the topics or essays Milbank covers, it is helpful for the purposes of the overall thesis to discuss an essay that has thus far gone without intensive response, "The Poverty of Niebuhrianism". There Milbank elaborates his criticism of the Christian realism associated with the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhrian realism, according to Milbank, generates the realities in order that it might criticise positions to which it is ironically enslaved. Thus, while Niebuhr's approach to realism—"the disposition to take all factors in a social and political situation, which offer resistance to established norms, into account, particularly the factors of self-interest and power,"<sup>1</sup>—believes itself to be critical of certain social and political ideological impulses, Milbank thinks that, in actuality, it creates those realities based on assumptions it mistakenly believes to be true. The effect is that

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<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, p. 119.

“its pessimism turns into over-optimism, its pragmatism into idealism, its anti-liberalism into liberalism, its confidence in God into confidence into humanity”.<sup>2</sup> Put succinctly, Milbank thinks that Niebuhr’s realism is everything it claims not to be.

Milbank does not suppose that Niebuhr’s realism intentionally creates false realities, but that despite its claims to be theological realism, its theology is grounded in a false myth adopted from the narrative of secular liberalism. This narrative, claims Milbank, states that there is a sovereign sphere—the secular—which operates independently of theological discourse, relegating theological belief to a role of irrelevance. The problem, to Milbank’s mind, is that the perceived secular order was not created *ex nihilo*, but instead has its roots in the theological, and therefore cannot truly be secular if secularism is understood to be a sphere which operates autonomously and independently of God.<sup>3</sup> Instead of theology being an entity separate from other social scientific methods, it actually provides the basis for all social sciences.

In chapter four we investigated the hermeneutics of Christian realism as it seeks to understand a meaningful existence. That enquiry, along with the ones carried out in the previous chapters, helped to provide a framework by which to understand Christian realism. Here, that framework will be used to respond to Milbank’s criticisms of Niebuhr’s realism. In response, I will address two points Milbank makes regarding Niebuhrian realism: the notion of limited human ethical possibilities and the invocation of the doctrine of original sin. It will be my argument that while Niebuhr does conceive of the human as limited in ethical possibilities, he does so differently than Milbank interprets. Moreover, the method by which Niebuhr understands limited human ethical possibilities does not associate him with the liberalism he was attempting to criticise, but clarifies further the problems inherent with that liberalism. Secondly, I will argue that Milbank has misinterpreted Niebuhr on the problem of original sin, and that Niebuhr’s conception of evil is similar to that of Milbank’s (i.e., evil as ontologically privative *contra* “post-Kantian” evil positivists),<sup>4</sup> though with different conclusions.

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<sup>2</sup> Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture*, p. 233.

<sup>3</sup> See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 9 (“Once, there was no ‘secular’...”); and “An Essay Against Secular Order.” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 15.2 (1987): 199-224.

<sup>4</sup> Cf., John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*, (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 1-25.

Milbank's work on Niebuhr is useful for our purposes because the picture Milbank draws of Niebuhr's realism is finally a hopeless one. He finds Niebuhr's articulation of Christian realism ultimately unable to transcend existential concerns and offer an imaginative alternative to the problems encountered in human existence. This is primarily because he thinks that Niebuhr's framework for interpreting these social contexts does little to provide the realist with the necessary imaginative tools by which he or she can imaginatively transcend the problems of human life. Interaction with Milbank's work will offer a helpful segue in to the second part of this thesis, where the ways in which the framework of Christian realism offers a way to understand theological hope are to be considered. Before that, though, let us turn to Milbank.

### 5.3. *Interpreting Milbank's Interpretation*

One leitmotif of *The Word Made Strange* is "the retrieval in Christianity of certain themes from Stoicism".<sup>5</sup> Milbank believes that Stoic naturalism is prominent in Niebuhrian realism and accounts for Niebuhr's mid-career break with certain Marxist elements that influenced his early thought. This form of naturalism is also indicative of an emphasis on the limits to human ethical possibilities Milbank finds pervasive in Niebuhr's later thought. These limits, which are constituted by "the notion that human finitude is an impassable barrier to the actualizing of the good life in the human world",<sup>6</sup> are of the reasons Milbank thinks Niebuhr finally to be allied with the liberalism he sought to criticise. Niebuhr, according to Milbank, arrives at the conclusion that there are such limits to ethical possibilities through a variety of ways: philosophically, ontologically, and ethically.

Philosophically, what Milbank detects as present in Niebuhr's early thought, though absent in his later considerations, is a "genuine realism in the philosophic sense: he [Niebuhr] claimed that certain *objective* and *regular* causal processes were at work in the human world, even if these were ultimately the contingent upshot of certain human historical choices."<sup>7</sup> Milbank considers this realism characteristic of the early Niebuhr's Marxist thought, and though he (Milbank) is unconcerned with the veracity of these processes, he highlights them because they ground Niebuhr's

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<sup>5</sup> Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, "The Word Made Speculative? John Milbank's Christological Poetics." *Modern Theology* 15.4 (1999): 417-432.

<sup>6</sup> Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, p. 235.

thought in a particular tradition of morally realistic/ethically naturalistic mode of thinking, such as the one discussed in chapter two. This view states that moral facts and principles exist and are therefore objective, insofar as they have a “nature” to which moral agents can appeal when describing the “good”, “right” or “just”. Nevertheless, the appeal moral agents assert when calling a particular moral act “wrong” leaves unaffected the natural status of the principle to which they appeal. As suggested in chapter two, “[m]oral realism is roughly the view that there are moral facts and true moral claims whose existence and nature are independent of our beliefs about what is right and wrong.”<sup>8</sup>

Milbank identifies early Niebuhrian realism with Marxist social analyses,<sup>9</sup> and he suggests that the loss of realistic thinking is coincidental with the abandonment of Marxist analysis in Niebuhr's later work.<sup>10</sup> While this link is made between loss of realism and Marxist analyses at the empirical level in Milbank's critique, it is a more tenuous link at the metaphysical level.

According to Milbank, Niebuhr's break with Marxist analyses and subsequent adoption of falsely created realities is most evident in Niebuhr's claims about human nature. Niebuhr, claims Milbank, forsook realistically pessimistic claims (i.e., “that the nature of our present historical condition is such that we are faced with tragic dilemmas in which it is impossible to avoid some complicity in evil”)<sup>11</sup> in exchange for a pessimism (which Milbank identifies as actually optimism) loosely affiliated with contrived notions about human nature and group behaviour.<sup>12</sup> This is a chiefly Stoic, and therefore pagan, way of conceiving the world which, Milbank thinks, consigns Niebuhrian realism to something other than theological realism.

### 5.3.1. *Ontological Criticism*

Ontologically, this Stoic naturalism, which assumes an “encounter between an absolute spiritual ideal and a ‘chaotic’ finite world which it does its best to

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 234.

<sup>8</sup> Brink, p. 7. See also, Sabina Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination in Ethics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, pp. 11-18.

<sup>9</sup> Specifically, Milbank means “the view that there is [sic] at work in history certain long-term cultural tendencies which are at present causing social conditions to deteriorate.” Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, p. 234.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 234-235.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 235.



regulate”,<sup>13</sup> functions in both human and communal groups, and is marked by a Niebuhrian emphasis on limited imaginations and understandings. Milbank criticises Niebuhr for understanding humans as imaginatively limited because he believes Niebuhr ascribes the characteristics of Stoic ethics (i.e. “natural barriers” between the real and ideal) to his own realism. I disagree with this assessment, as will be made clear in the below section on imagination, because I think that imagination and understanding serve roles greater than mere empathetic instruments for Niebuhr, though Milbank does not.<sup>14</sup> Milbank thinks that because imagination for Niebuhr can do little more than evoke empathy, moral agents are thus unable to deal in a genuinely realistic manner with the contexts in which they live. The result for the Niebuhrian realist is conscription into a liberal narrative rooted in ontological violence, precisely because the moral agent is unable to imagine an alternative ontology of peace identified with true theological realism. That is, Milbank thinks that Niebuhr’s putative dispossession of imagination results in Niebuhr’s inability to do other than align his ethic with the ethic of the status quo, which is liberalism founded on violence. For Milbank, this is a key failure of Niebuhr’s realism because it does not consider that “the transcending capacity of the human mind can be conceived as the very impetus that makes social transformation possible”.<sup>15</sup> Thus, for Milbank, the Niebuhrian realist’s only repudiation of violence is to strive for less violence rather than an overcoming of violence through peace.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 236.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p. 238.

<sup>15</sup> Milbank, “An Essay Against Secular Order”: 200. This argument is not altogether dissimilar from some of Milbank’s other arguments about violence in modern contexts. See, for example, “Ontological Violence or the Postmodern Problematic” in *Theology and Social Theory*, pp. 278-326. Though not directly related to his remonstrance of Niebuhr, the reader can discern certain key elements (especially with regard to understandings of genealogies and narrative histories) in Milbank’s interpretation of secular liberalism as grounded in violence, and how these elements influence his critique of Niebuhrian realism.

<sup>16</sup> It is difficult to say how this understanding is explicitly Niebuhrian, or where Milbank gets his conclusions. For example, Niebuhr begins the second volume of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* by saying, “[T]he conflicts of history need not be accepted as normative, but man looks towards a reality where these conflicts are overcome in a reign of universal order and peace. All human actions are conditioned on the one hand by nature’s necessities and limitations, and determined on the other hand by an explicit or implicit loyalty to man’s conception of the changeless principles which underlie the change. His loyalty to these principles prompts him to seek the elimination of contingent, irrelevant and contradictory elements in the flux, for the sake of realizing the real essence of his life, as defined by the unchanging and eternal power which governs it.” *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. II, p. 2.

### 5.3.2. *Criticisms of Ethics*

Ethically, the Stoic naturalism Milbank perceives in Niebuhrian realism is most discernible when applied to practical considerations of dilemmas such as those pertaining to nuclear armament and deterrence. To Milbank, Niebuhrians such as Richard Harries and John Hick are exemplary of the negative effects limited imagination and understanding have on the practical outworking of Niebuhrian realism. Instead of decrying the ontological violence of secular liberalism by appealing to expanded understanding and creative imagination, the Niebuhrian realist presupposes a limited human capacity to imagine or comprehend realities at hand, and so deals with simulacra of realities. Consequently, "Niebuhrian 'realism' is unable to envisage the long-term tendency in human affairs not to the gradual containment of conflict, but to its final and catastrophic extension".<sup>17</sup> Put simply, Niebuhrian realism's limited imagination leads only to limited solutions in human conflict. Of course, Milbank's reading of Niebuhr begs the question of *why* there are supposed natural barriers between the ideal and the real, which begets his discussion of original sin in Niebuhr's thought.

### 5.4. *Criticism of Original Sin*

If Milbank's account of the perceived limits on human possibilities in Niebuhrian realism can be divided philosophically, ontologically and ethically, then his account of Niebuhrian original sin can be understood ontologically, epistemologically and ethically.

Ontologically, Milbank thinks Niebuhr's initial investigation of original sin is sufficiently theologically grounded because Niebuhr appropriately grasps that original sin cannot be positioned in historically unconditioned human nature, but that human sin is still a fact.<sup>18</sup> Because facts warrant explanation, Milbank rightly sees Niebuhr's location of original sin in the paradox of human will, which "is inherently paradoxical, because while we recognize it as true that we are never going to will all that we ought, nonetheless we are always able to say in retrospect, with reference to any particular act or omission, 'well, I could have done better'".<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, though Milbank thinks Niebuhr initially correct on sin's locale, he believes Niebuhr

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<sup>17</sup> Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, p. 243.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

returns to Stoic presuppositions, evidenced by two problematic ends to which such a reading of original sin point.

First, Niebuhr's analysis is, according to Milbank, not extracted from the individual level and applied to communal contexts. As Milbank notes, "despite his excellent analysis of how the will works, Niebuhr ends up offering original sin as an *alternative* to historical explanations of the deep-rootedness of human evil".<sup>20</sup> Second, by positing this alternative, Milbank claims that Niebuhr is unable to answer the form original sin first took in the human will—the ontological question—and so locates it instead in an ambiguous historical drama. While he avoided an ahistorical appropriation of human nature, he could not avoid it with regard to the problem of human history. Therefore, Milbank thinks Niebuhr's interpretation of original sin must be regarded as a problem mythically and immediately related to all historical contingencies, rather than the "once-and-for-all fall from grace which is the absolute *sine qua non* of Christian ethics and which alone permits a recognition of how history seems driven in the direction of catastrophe".<sup>21</sup> The notion that original sin can be universally related to all historical circumstances obliges the epistemological consideration of how the moral agent understands this relationship.

#### 5.4.1. Epistemological Criticism

Epistemologically, what Milbank finds problematic in Niebuhrian realism is the method by which the realist interprets the realities in which she lives, and the conclusions drawn from that method. "For the Christian", says Milbank "a realistic apprehension of the world does not consist in factual survey and surmise, but in an evaluative reading of its signs as *clues to ultimate meanings and causes*. Thus the world is construed as gift and promise, and we construct the narrative picture of a Creator God".<sup>22</sup> It is important to note here Milbank's earlier criticism of the limited imaginative capacity of Niebuhrian realism. The notion that imaginative powers are limited for the Niebuhrian realist is once again at play here; for how else can the moral agent evaluate and interpret clues that point beyond themselves to something of ultimate ends and origins, except through the power of imagination? Imagination

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 244.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

is, in other words, the foundation of evaluation. Also, the emphasis on gift foreshadows much of Milbank's later work on gift, especially in *Being Reconciled*.<sup>23</sup>

#### 5.4.2. Criticism of Ethics

Ethically, the component of Niebuhrian realism (substantiated most clearly by Harries, according to Milbank) which causes the greatest amount of concern for Milbank is the notion that because of moral immaturity or ignorance, the moral agent finds defence for his or her sinful actions. This recourse to the previous discussion about ignorance and immaturity results in Milbank's questioning the nature of evil action in Niebuhrian realism. Elsewhere, Milbank has devoted considerably more energy to this discussion.<sup>24</sup> There he criticises philosophers of radical evil, whom he terms "post-Kantians",<sup>25</sup> and defends the idea that evil is always finally an act of privation, rather than a something which can be willed. This, I believe, is a position with which Niebuhr himself would agree, narrowing the gap Milbank perceives between his understanding of evil and original sin and that of a Niebuhrian realist.

Milbank's criticism of Niebuhr is thus summarised in two central points. First, Milbank thinks that Niebuhr places unnecessary limits on human ethical possibilities, and he criticises Niebuhr on philosophical, ontological and ethical grounds on this point. Secondly, he thinks that Niebuhr's account of original sin though initially helpful, is ultimately guilty of the same kind of presuppositions that Niebuhr has regarding the limits of ethical possibilities.

Having offered a synopsis of the two central points of concern in Milbank's "The Poverty of Niebuhrianism", we will now offer a response to these criticisms in the following sections. As noted already, my central argument is that Milbank misinterprets Niebuhr on the problem of limits to human ethical possibilities because of a misappropriation of a particular type of naturalism in Niebuhr's thought; and that Milbank and Niebuhr, while disagreeing on the nature of original sin, are more closely aligned on the problem of the nature of evil and human will than Milbank allows.

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Milbank, "Grace: The Midwinter Sacrifice", pp. 138-161.

<sup>24</sup> Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, pp. 1-25.

<sup>25</sup> It is useful to note that Milbank also refers to "post-Kantian Christian ethics...very well exemplified in the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr" later in "The Poverty of Niebuhrianism". See *The Word Made Strange*, 246.



### 5.5. *Toward an Accurate Interpretation of Christian Realism*

Milbank rightly speaks of the framework of Niebuhr's realism as one reliant on naturalistic thinking. We saw in chapters two and three that Niebuhr's realism shares many similarities with both ethical naturalism and the Catholic natural moral law tradition, post-Vatican II. Thus, if it were simple enough to declare that the recognition of an unattainable moral ideal is commensurate with a realistic ethic, there would be little with which to disagree in Milbank's reading of Niebuhr. That, however, is not what Milbank argues. He identifies Niebuhrian realism with a very specific kind of naturalism—Stoic naturalism—and thus as a pagan ethic.<sup>26</sup> Of course, this association with Stoicism is the result of Milbank's suggestion that Niebuhr's realism is committed to interpretations of limited moral possibilities for humans. This, I suggest, is where the problems with Milbank's interpretation of Niebuhrian realism begin. The rest of Milbank's conclusions regarding Niebuhrian realism are accordingly questionable; for, if an initial diagnosis is inaccurate, how likely is it that subsequent interpretations will be correspondingly afflicted?

There must be a source of similarity between the Stoicism Milbank ascribes to Niebuhr and Niebuhr's realism if the charge of Stoic naturalism is accurate. This similarity is identified by Milbank as the notion that there are insuperable and permanently chaotic conflicts between the essentiality and existentiality of human life, which are characterised by "natural barriers" that prevent human existence from realising its essential (ideal) nature. Milbank is right to point to Niebuhr's allusion to Stoicism in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* as instructive to understanding Niebuhr's construal of realism. However, where Milbank deviates from accuracy in his analysis of Niebuhr's ethic is with his charge that Niebuhr's criticism of Stoic natural law is finally colluded with the structures of Stoic thought.

There are two issues at play here. First, what Niebuhr intends when he speaks of Stoic natural law in the chapter Milbank references<sup>27</sup> is not a vindication of Stoic thought, but precisely a criticism of the sort Milbank himself offers when considering Stoic natural law in relation to Augustine's critique of it;<sup>28</sup> for Niebuhr is criticising orthodox Christianity because of its failure to recognise the law of love as

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 236-237.

<sup>27</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Law of Love in Politics and Economics (Criticism of Christian Orthodoxy)" in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, pp. 139-166.

an active agent in all human social interaction.<sup>29</sup> Niebuhr introduces the discussion of Stoic natural law in order to criticise not its co-option by orthodox Christianity, but the application that resulted from the co-option. Historically, he sees the adoption of Stoic natural law by orthodox Christianity as collaborative with “the Pauline conception of the divine ordinance of government (Rom. 13)”.<sup>30</sup> The point Niebuhr is stressing here is that early orthodox Christianity, in developing its political ethic, was deeply influenced by Greek philosophical elements *and* portions of the biblical narrative, because these “philosophical traditions attracted Christian thinkers precisely for their apparent capacity to express elements of the biblical tradition. The doctrine that political rule is not a gift of created nature but a providential preservation against evil *does not depend on Stoicism alone*; it is arguably implicit in the Yahwist history of Genesis itself...”.<sup>31</sup> What Niebuhr then criticises is orthodox Christianity’s “strategy of compromise”, which “was so well aware of the fact of sin that it saw in the ideal of love only an ultimate criterion by which all human social achievements are revealed in their imperfections”. While presenting the law of love in such an arbitrating position is suitable to Niebuhr’s realism, the problem Niebuhr finds is that “Christian orthodoxy failed to derive any significant politico-moral principles from the law of love. It did not realize that the law of love is not only in position of ultimate transcendence over all moral achievements, but that it suggests possibilities which *immediately* transcend any achievements of justice by which society has integrated its life”.<sup>32</sup> This sounds rather far removed from the charge that though Niebuhr allows for the law of love in his political ethic, “he does so only in the crassest possible manner”,<sup>33</sup> for what Niebuhr is arguing is that the law of love occupies a place of both ultimate transcendence and immediate immanence such that it always stands directly and intimately related to human existence, yet paradoxically exists regardless of human conceptions about what constitutes this law. That is, love can be recognised in say, a

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<sup>28</sup> Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, pp. 236-237.

<sup>29</sup> Cf., *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 144.

<sup>30</sup> Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 144.

<sup>31</sup> Oliver and Joan Lockwood O’Donovan (eds.), *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought 100-1625*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), p. 4. Italics mine.

<sup>32</sup> Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 144. Italics mine.

<sup>33</sup> Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, p. 236.

human act, but its existence is not dependent on that act. What results, then, is much less a Stoic conception of natural law than it is an assimilation of the ethically naturalistic, or morally realistic ideals of twentieth century moral philosophy, as we will see more fully in a moment.

The second issue to consider is the notion of chaotic conflict Milbank addresses in Niebuhr's thought. As before, Milbank accurately notes that Niebuhr's realism was developed with the assumption that there are constant and pervasive conflicts between both individuals and nations, and that these conflicts demand our attention as moral agents who attempt to mediate the conflicts so that "tentative harmonies" may be established. Again, though, Milbank slightly misreads what Niebuhr says about the agents involved in these conflicts, and the misreading results in significant problems for the remainder of Milbank's critique of Niebuhrian realism. Continuing his criticism of Niebuhr's apparent desire to push love to the margins because of its ineffectiveness at the very level of sociality, Milbank notes that for Niebuhr, "Love has to be mediated to the social realm by the intervention of a purely instrumental reasoning which is able to deduce that freedom can only become real in society as a result of our adopting an *abstract* principle of equality".<sup>34</sup> What Milbank understands this to reveal is that the law of love is powerless in the practicalities of existential conflict, and must be considered secondary to the principle of equality which is the only true principle capable of controlling the chaos of human existence. Moreover, the principle of equality can only be managed by human reason.

What is important to note here is that Milbank criticises Niebuhr for an adherence to the notion that conflicts take place between levels of essentiality (the ideal) and existentiality (the level of human existence) to the degree that Niebuhr is "fully assimilated" to Stoic natural law. That is, Milbank thinks that because Niebuhr conceives of the moral good as objective and essentially transcendent over human existence, Niebuhr leaves no room for this moral good to become immanent in human existence. If this were true, declarations that Niebuhr's ethic allows equality and human reason to usurp the place of *agape* and the rule of love would be just. However, this is not what Niebuhr is arguing when he speaks of conflicts that

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

mark human existence. Instead of conflicts between the essential and the existential—the ideal and the real—Niebuhr's attention is drawn much more decidedly to conflicts that happen on the level of existentiality only; that is, conflicts taking place between the real and the real, between human life and human life. The role the ideal of love assumes is not one of ancillary importance, but of chief significance for a full understanding of what it means to be a moral agent. While Milbank is right to highlight the passages from *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* that illustrate Niebuhr's concern with conflict, he does so at the expense of accurately interpreting what those passages are actually about. So, for instance, when Milbank quotes Niebuhr's declaration that “the forces of nature are in conflict with the necessities of man as spirit”,<sup>35</sup> the point Niebuhr is stressing is not that humans are in constant competition with an ideal, but that there are certain constraints with which humans must contend when engaging one another (and engagement is always a moral act), and it is only through attempts to embody the essentiality of human life—the ideal—that those constraints are appropriately addressed.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the ideal is fully subsumed into human life as the basis for human existence. This is illustrated most succinctly in Niebuhr's frequently repeated aphorism that securing justice in a sinful world was ultimately about securing “tentative harmonies of *life with life* which are less than the best”.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, (London: SCM, 1963), p. 164; cited in *The Word Made Strange*, p. 236.

<sup>36</sup> Milbank's inclusion of this particular quote strikes the reader as odd, for the discussion from which it is drawn is about the biological differences between the sexes, and the ways in which “nature” has prepared each sex for a role in child-rearing. Thus, the “forces of nature” are more to do with the biological differences between the sexes and the inherent limitations therein, than with conceptions of Stoic ethics leading to Enlightenment liberalism. What Niebuhr does say is that “An adequate social morality will...be guided...both by the principles of equality and by the organic facts of existence” when dealing with differences between the sexes. It seems implausible, then, to assume that this distinguishes Niebuhr as a Stoic or Enlightenment liberal when that is not the subject of his address. See Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, pp. 151-152. Milbank's two other citations (“in every human situation and relationship there is an ideal possibility, and there are given facts of human nature, historic and fortuitous inequalities, geographic and other natural divisive forces, contingent and accidental circumstances”; “[inequalities] may be, and usually are, caused by forces of nature and history which an intelligent control of social life can greatly restrict and sometimes completely overcome”, *The Word Made Strange*, p. 236) support what he is attempting to argue, but they are still misunderstood, as discussed more above.

<sup>37</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christianity and Power Politics* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1940), p. 9. Italics mine. See also Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, p. 192; and his *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, pp. 60-61, both of which contain discussions regarding the notion of life being in a state of conflict with life.



Furthermore, Milbank thinks a liberal conception of equality based on the premise of rationalist thought to be a replacement of love as the primary instrument for social interaction in Niebuhrian realism.<sup>38</sup> In his reading of Niebuhr, humans are incapable of realising love socially and are thus confined to Promethean efforts at only modicums of justice, which is simply the next best thing to love and is defined as “equality before the law”. This is precisely the point at which Niebuhr is, according to Milbank, drawn irrevocably into the ontological violence of Enlightenment liberalism, and is destined to forsake any likeness of an ethic generously predicated on the gift of Christian tradition, a gift which, because of its naissane in peace, is ontologically counter to Enlightenment liberalism’s violence and is received only through sanctification mediated by the Church.<sup>39</sup> If the essential is only to hover as an ineffective spirit over all human interaction and moral engagement, the consequence is that the existential is rooted in nothing more than violence which seeks to maintain the distance between the ideal and the real.

Again, this interpretation of Niebuhrian realism depends upon a belief that Niebuhr construes love as the primary agent in social composition in terms of utopian ineffectuality, and that all life is in permanent conflict with the *summum bonum* of love. As noted above, such an interpretation inaccurately portrays Niebuhrian realism as uncritically pessimistic (which leads Niebuhr obviously to optimism, in Milbank’s opinion).

#### 5.6. *Niebuhr and Liberalism*

Milbank rightly classifies Niebuhr as a liberal. However, what is achieved with this classification is a fairly opaque presentation of the otherwise ambiguous term, “liberalism”. That is, Milbank fails to discuss the fact that political liberalism has never existed in a vacuum, but has been variously expressed and diversely manifested over its relatively brief history. However, based on what we know of Milbank’s previous work, particularly the association of liberalism and ontological violence in *Theology and Social Theory*, the reader is aware that when Milbank speaks of liberalism, he does so with the implication that violence is the necessary concomitant of liberalism. Based on this, were one to accept without criticism the representation of Niebuhr as a liberal according to Milbank’s definition, he or she

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<sup>38</sup> Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, p. 236.

could follow the logical progression of Milbank's thought from violence to liberalism, and be left with a vision that ultimately identifies Niebuhr as the paterfamilias of a liberalism which revels in violent expressions of individual and corporate wills-to-power.

The problem with this identification of liberalism is one of ambiguity. It is unclear to the reader why liberalism—or secularism, as the consequence of liberalism suggested by Milbank<sup>40</sup>—must inherently be identified with violence to the degree that Milbank suggests. This is not to say that Milbank has never attempted to make the association between liberalism and ontological violence, for certainly *Theology and Social Theory* was dedicated precisely to this project. However, the same criticism that Milbank speaks too generically of liberalism has been made in response even to this work.<sup>41</sup> What this observation does suggest, then, is that the tenuousness of the link between a loosely conceived liberalism and its concurrent ontological violence is most perceptively laid bare in Milbank's criticism of Niebuhr, for nowhere in this criticism does Milbank define specifically how, or if Niebuhr's liberalism makes his realism successively violent, which is the originating point for Milbank's discussion of liberalism. What is suggested is that Niebuhr's ethic is so thoroughly mired in individualism that it cannot help but be associated with Enlightenment liberalism which sees individualism writ large—the individual seeking boundless self-expression over all historical contingencies and over other individuals through violent coercion—as the inaugurating point for the liberalism Milbank addresses. The implication is that this individualism logically results in violence, for if the human is boundlessly expressive, he or she must be so through the use of violent force. Therefore, Niebuhrian realism must be irretrievably entrenched in violence.<sup>42</sup> Readers will recognise the status of individual boundlessness as the antecedent and secularised virtue of a politically liberal society grounded in ontological violence as one of the distinctive critiques of Radical Orthodoxy,

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. Milbank, "Grace: The Midwinter Sacrifice" in *Being Reconciled*, pp. 138-161.

<sup>40</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, Chapter one.

<sup>41</sup> Cf., Christopher J. Insole, "Against Radical Orthodoxy: The Dangers of Overcoming Political Liberalism" in *The Politics of Human Frailty: A Theological Defence of Political Liberalism*, (London: SCM Press, 2004), pp. 125-157.

<sup>42</sup> This is made most clear in Milbank's identification of John Hick and Richard Harries as Niebuhrian realists who were also apologists for state nuclear armament. See Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, p. 237.

Milbank's theological project. The liberal effort of the state as secular agent to replace what was once sacrosanct "proceeds logically from the anthropology of individual *dominium* on which the liberal state is based".<sup>43</sup> That is, if the state is a grossly outworked expression of individuals seeking power, and this individual ambition is originated in violence, then the state is logically established on those same violent underpinnings.

When Niebuhr speaks of the individual, he does so both critically and approvingly. Pervasive individualism, defined above as a result in the belief that the human is boundless in terms of self-expression, is demonstrative to Niebuhr of human anxiety over the cognisance of looming death and human response to that anxiety, which exhibited itself as pride, or a desire to usurp God's place who is at once the ultimate source of transcendence and arbiter over all that is finite and infinite. Positively, the human is indeed free for self-expression, but this freedom is paradoxically mitigated by human finiteness. "Anxiety is the inevitable concomitant of the paradox of freedom and finiteness in which man is involved. Anxiety is the internal precondition of sin. It is the inevitable spiritual state of man, standing in the paradoxical situation of freedom and finiteness".<sup>44</sup> For Niebuhr, then, if sinful violence is the attempt to overcome the finiteness of the historical condition, then anxiety is the necessary antecedent to sin.

Niebuhr, in contrast to Milbank, tends toward specificity when he speaks of liberalism, despite the fact that he can be frustratingly woolly when addressing a spate of other topics (naturalism, for instance). Liberalism is interpreted as a predicament of paradox. On the one hand, Niebuhr identifies liberalism "in the broadest sense" with "[i]ts strategy to free the individual from the traditional restraints of a society, to endow the "governed" with the power of the franchise, to establish the principle of the "consent of the governed" as the basis of political society..."<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, though, Niebuhr finds this broad definition of liberalism problematic because it does not take into consideration the "distinct

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<sup>43</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, "The City: Beyond Secular Parodies" in John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 192, cited in Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 101.

<sup>44</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Desitny of Man*, Vol. I, p. 182.

<sup>45</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Liberalism: Illusions and Realities", *New Republic* 133 (July 4, 1955): 11.

connotations” of liberalism in modern contexts. Specifically, Niebuhr is referring to liberalism in “technical societies...which insisted that economic life was to be free of any restraint...and also used to describe the political strategy of those classes which preferred security to absolute liberty and which sought to bring economic enterprise under political control for the sake of establishing minimal standards of security and welfare”.<sup>46</sup>

What distinguishes Niebuhr from the kind of Enlightenment liberalism with which Milbank associates him is that, despite Milbank’s critique, and perhaps even in alignment with Milbank, Niebuhr is actually critical of the rationalism behind such ideological liberalism. He (Niebuhr) finds illusory the idea that societies are perfectible (i.e., more “free”) through a vague progressive rationalism inherent in human nature and instead points to the failure, endemic to Enlightenment liberalism, to “take the factors of interest and power seriously, which expected all parochial loyalties to be dissolved in more universal loyalties”.<sup>47</sup> Such a statement seems fully to support Milbank’s declaration that “the nature of our present historical condition is such that we are faced with tragic dilemmas in which it is impossible to avoid some complicity in evil”.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, because Milbank thinks Niebuhr conceives of the nature of love as secondary to the liberal principle of rational thought, he sees a subsequent division with Niebuhr.

### 5.7. *Liberty and Equality*

The reason Milbank’s interpretation of Niebuhr is so implausible, especially as concerns critiques of liberalism, is because of the sharp distinction Milbank draws between Christian realism as founded in certain features of human nature as opposed to the absolute love ethic of the Christian gospel. It is decidedly more hermeneutically accurate to acknowledge, as has been argued in the previous chapters, that love provides the ethical underpinnings, indeed the sole foundation of Niebuhr’s thought, and differentiates Niebuhrian realism from other forms of humanistic ethics of the mid-twentieth century that sought to ground their conceptions of justice in alternatives to theological conceptions of love. Lovin makes this point when illustrating what distinguishes Niebuhr’s elucidation of justice

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Niebuhr, “Liberalism: Illusions and Realities”, p. 12.

<sup>48</sup> Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, pp. 234-235.



over against Rawls (a figure who seems much more suited to Milbank's critiques of Enlightenment liberalism than does Niebuhr). Drawing on the suggestion that Niebuhrian realism is a form of moral realism and ethical naturalism, Lovin argues that the *prima facie* characteristic of this realism is "benevolence".<sup>49</sup> Lovin rightly notes that for Rawlsian liberalism, "mutual disinterest begins with a respect for the fact that the other person [in a politically liberal society] has aims and goals, although you need not care at all whether these particular goals are realized".<sup>50</sup> Niebuhr, on the other hand, begins his enquiry in social ethics by asking whether justice, however approximate, can realistically be realised. The conclusion at which he arrives is that even to begin "the pursuit of justice requires that we understand what it would mean for real persons to live well",<sup>51</sup> which is precisely to care about the neighbour's aims and goals. However, we can only do that through assimilating ourselves to an ethic which looks to love the neighbour as ourselves (Mark 12:31). What this requires, according to Lovin, is that we must first recognise that as with ourselves, our neighbours desire certain things in order for them to live "well". More than just a transitory nod at our neighbour's particular desires for good lives, justice requires that we act reasonably in order that those desires may come to fruition. The basis here is not some loosely defined "equality before the law",<sup>52</sup> inbuilt with the notion of "rationally autonomous representatives of citizens in a society",<sup>53</sup> but love, which is defined as "the disposition to seek the well-being of persons generally that theologians and moral philosophers have called "benevolence"". <sup>54</sup>

Equality is certainly a desired demonstration of the particular outworking of love in Niebuhrian realism, and it, alongside liberty, serves as a regulative principle in Niebuhr's conception of justice.<sup>55</sup> However, it is inaccurate to claim that equality does not belong to the absolute demand of love.<sup>56</sup> For as we have seen, with love as the basis for social ethics in Niebuhrian realism, all regulative principles are only responses to and informed by the law of love. "Equality, taken by itself, is not

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<sup>49</sup> Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, pp. 198-202.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, p. 196.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>52</sup> Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, p. 236.

<sup>53</sup> John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 305.

<sup>54</sup> Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, p. 199.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 217-230.

<sup>56</sup> Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, p. 236.

realistic. Persons are not equal. They are different. But when we must deal with persons in large groups and in whole societies, equality becomes an instrument of love by opposing all the inequalities that do not result from love, but from the exercise of power over those in need".<sup>57</sup>

The final issue to address in Milbank's critique of Niebuhrian realism being founded on certain assumptions about human nature is the notion of self-transcendence, to which I now turn my attention.

### *5.8. Transcendence and Moral Imagination*

As noted above, one of the key features Milbank thinks distinguishes Niebuhrian realism as an ethic embedded in liberalism is the perceived incapacity of the imagination to envisage anything other than tragic necessities for the world in such a way that violence becomes not something to imagine against, or overcome, but something in which the human imagination is imbued. Of all of Milbank's criticisms, this is probably the most difficult one to understand for those who have spent a considerable amount of time reading Niebuhr. As suggested throughout, Milbank rightly identifies Niebuhr's ethic with certain features of human nature, but wrongly identifies exactly what those features are. The misinterpretation of limited human imagination is the most inaccurate of the criticisms so far.

The main problem with Milbank's critique at this point is, as considered above, that Milbank suggests Niebuhr is unduly reliant on human reason and Enlightenment rationalism from which Niebuhr purportedly abstracts his realism. He then criticises Niebuhr for lacking the necessary imaginative capabilities commensurate with a Christian ethic which seeks to avoid tragic conflations with sin, and is also impotent in the regulative functions of power and judgment. What is implied, then, is that Niebuhr's imagination is restricted because of the kind of reason by which it is informed. Rather than the discursive reasoning of Aristotle and later, Augustine (whose thought Radical Orthodoxy seeks to recapture and reengage), Niebuhr's ethic cannot imagine past the ontological violence in which it is mired.

If realism is defined as "the disposition to take all factors in a social and political situation, which offer resistance to established norms, into account, particularly the factors of self-interest and power", it is understandable that one

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<sup>57</sup> Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, p. 220.

might conceivably identify imagination as necessarily non-evaluative and impotent, for it would seem that the capacity of the imagination is fundamentally related to the determination of exactly what those established norms are, and a potentially uncritical adherence to them. When the established norms of the political situation are determined ontologically violent, as Milbank argues, then someone who claims the definition of realism offered here seems incapable of “encouraging the imaginative exploration of social experience, geared to discovering novel moral aspects of situation and thus achieving a more adequate grasp of moral reality”, because such a person “is sowing the seeds of a critical tendency which he cannot take to control: the tendency towards a state of affairs in which the ‘moral fabric’ of the community is perpetually being demolished and rebuilt”.<sup>58</sup> But is this necessarily the case for the Niebuhrian realist insofar as Niebuhrian realism is identified with a particular kind of ethical naturalism and moral realism? Sabina Lovibond, who has argued for a similar form of realism to Niebuhr’s (though she does not consider Niebuhr), does not think so:

Suppose we do undertake to substitute a different way of life for our familiar one. In this situation, the different way of life envisaged by us may be one which has never actually existed. It may simply be something which we represent to ourselves in thought—a product of our (moral or political) ‘imagination’. Yet as long as the extant criteria of moral and political rationality are not so rigid that any innovation in the relevant discursive practices is automatically condemned to be perceived as an *error*, the language in which we express the thought of that different way of life can be the one made available to us by the way of life in which we have been brought up to participate...In other words, our experiential grasp of the moral institutions of our community is enough to equip us with a moral imagination which transcends the range of concrete experience that can be had within our community dominated by institutions such as those. Our acquisition of the concepts we shall use as participants in *Sittlichkeit*, or customary ethics, also provides us with all the intellectual resources we need for the purposes of *Moralität*—that part of ethics which concerns our obligation to bring about, not what already exists, but what ought to exist.<sup>59</sup>

In other words, our moral imagination is related to the experiences we have had in the past, but it is not incapable of transcending those experiences. As such,

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<sup>58</sup> Sabina Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination in Ethics*, p. 192.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 195-196.

moral imagination for the realist is about taking into account past experiences and imagining new ways of correcting past injustices. Obviously, imagination is here connected primarily to an epistemic function. That is, the moral agent's imagination only embarks on the moral quest to interpret, evaluate, and judge the brokenness of human life when she seeks to know present circumstances, and is thus capable of envisaging circumstances that could be new, but not altogether dissimilar from the circumstances with which she currently lives (otherwise, it could not be said to be morally realistic, but would instead be delusional, or fanciful). Knowledge, as Lovibond suggests, is borne out of experiential wisdom. Niebuhr makes the same point, but appeals to coherence as the prerequisite from which wisdom is gained. "The whole of reality is characterized by a basic coherence. Things and events are in a vast web of relationships and are known through their relations. Perceptual knowledge is possible only within a framework of conceptual images, which in some sense conform to the structures in which reality is organized".<sup>60</sup> Notice, again, the element of human existence here described as a "vast web of relationships", which plays such a significant role in Niebuhr's thought. Still, Niebuhr is not unmindful of the fact that giving coherence impunity as the plumb line against which all truthful moral enquiries and judgments are measured is problematic for an ethic which seeks to deal with the existential and conflicting elements of human life.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, moral inquisition begins with the question of what is good, and the moral realist attempts to answer that question not by stating what the properties of goodness are, but by seeking ways in which previous experiences have cohered with what the moral agent thinks to be good, with full knowledge that the properties of goodness obtain separately from any agent's conception of them. As such, the application of

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<sup>60</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Coherence, Incoherence, and Christian Faith" in *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1953), p. 175.

<sup>61</sup> Specifically, Niebuhr identifies the problems as: "1. Things and events may be too unique to fit into any system of meaning; and their uniqueness is destroyed by a premature coordination to a system of meaning, particularly a system which identifies meaning with rationality...2. Realms of coherence and meaning may stand in rational contradiction to each other; and they are not fully understood if the rational contradiction is prematurely resolved as, for instance, being and becoming, eternity and time...3. There are configurations and structures which stand athwart every rationally conceived system of meaning and cannot be appreciated in terms of the alternative efforts to bring the structure completely into one system or the other...4. Genuine freedom, with the implied possibility of violating the natural and rational structures of the world, cannot be conceived in any natural or rational scheme of coherence." Niebuhr, "Coherence, Incoherence, and Christian Faith", pp. 176-178.



coherence is, for Niebuhr, the best method for determining and interpreting a “basic test of truth”.<sup>62</sup>

This emphasis on coherent imaginative power leads Niebuhr to place an equal amount of importance on the concept of human self-transcendence. Realities assume a regulative function within the notion of imaginative self-transcendence. As noted, humans can freely imagine the kinds of new possibilities Lovibond mentions when they accurately apprehend the kinds of realities with which they contend. Yet, the human moral agent is not bound by those realities. “There is no point in human history in which the human spirit is freed of natural necessity. But there is also no point at which the mind cannot transcend the given circumstances to imagine a more ultimate possibility”.<sup>63</sup> Imagination is the vehicle through which self-transcendence is possible, and that transcendence assumes a dual nature. On the one hand, imagination appears to be an instrument of infinite regress.<sup>64</sup> “The human mind is such that not only can it create innumerable schemes of coherence...but it can also itself transcend each one of its own creations. That is, the mind can question, criticize, doubt everything that the mind produces; and it can, because of that infinite critical ability, refashion all its achieved forms of order into alternative forms”.<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, though, “[h]owever universal, objective, and timeless rationality [to which the imagination is related] may appear to be, reason is, nonetheless, itself creaturely, finite, and limited”.<sup>66</sup> These parallels are illustrative of the kind of polarity prevalent in Niebuhr's thinking on the ethical imagination. He gives an instructive word on how we imagine the “not yet” of human existence when he notes that:

[t]he capacity for rational self-transcendence opens up constantly new and higher points of vantage for judging our finite perspectives in the light of a more inclusive truth. On the other hand our involvement in natural and historical flux sets final limits upon our quest for the truth and insures the partial and particular character of even the highest cultural vantage point. Thus human culture is under the tension of finiteness and freedom, of the limited and the unlimited.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, p. 176.

<sup>63</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. II, p. 2.

<sup>64</sup> See Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, p. 114.

<sup>65</sup> Langdon Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, p. 58.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, p. 59.

<sup>67</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature of Destiny of Man*, Vol. II, p. 214.

That is, humans can imagine virtuous alternatives to present immoral circumstances, but they are still finite creatures, and attempts to assay the social, political, or moral climates of existence in search of virtuous alternatives are at risk of producing even more immoral circumstances than those which currently exist, precisely as a result of the existential conflict of life with life mentioned above. It is true that Niebuhr's pessimism leads him at times almost blithely to dismiss the possibilities of a more virtuous existence, but the point is that such possibilities are never excluded from Niebuhrian realism, regardless of how improbable they occasionally seem to be.<sup>68</sup>

If it is accurate to say that Niebuhr's realism relies on a sense of coherence and the power of self-transcendence to form an ethical response to imagination, it is unclear exactly how this puts Niebuhr at odds with discursive reason in the Aristotelian sense. Milbank suggests otherwise when he states that with Niebuhr, "imagination is outside the realm of ethical intuition, and...[Niebuhr] has, therefore, no idea of a discursive 'practical reason' in the Aristotelian sense, and no idea of ethical action as linked to 'expanding vision', a process in which one's apprehension of the world is inherently evaluative...".<sup>69</sup> Unfortunately for the reader, Milbank does not elaborate on exactly how Niebuhr's imaginative ethic is initially flawed, though he does call attention to the consequence of limited imaginative power, which is basically an inability to supplant a primitive conception of culpability that is intrinsic to the notion of original sin with the evaluative power of Christian ethics. But if the imagination (*phantasia*) for Aristotle is related, yet distinct from discursive reasoning (*phronesis*), even minimally, this means that, "rational deliberation will involve comparing alternatives in terms of the more and the less";<sup>70</sup> a statement fully defensible by the notion that realism seeks "to take all factors in a social and political situation, which offer resistance to established norms, into account...". Moreover, if the process by which the virtues of imagination and discursive practical thinking are inculcated involves first basic sensory perception, then "practical thinking", and

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<sup>68</sup> See Niebuhr's essay, "A Critique of Pacifism" in *Love and Justice*, p. 242 in which he states, "Imagination is a virtue and achievement that is rare at best and that only occasionally rises to such a potency that it is able to create as well as to discover hidden virtue in other men".

<sup>69</sup> Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, p. 238.

<sup>70</sup> Henry S. Richardson, "Desire and the Good in *De Anima*" in Martha C. Nussbaum and Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (eds.), *Essays on Aristotle's De Anima*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 397.

finally imagining (self-transcendence), then it would seem that an ethic such as Niebuhr's, which attempts to make coherent sense of the realities with which it is faced before imagining new possibilities for those realities, would comport with what Milbank suggests is necessary for a constructive Christian ethic, but that is lacking from Niebuhr's realism, according to Milbank.<sup>71</sup>

This is not to say that the kind of ethic Milbank advocates and Niebuhr's realism are the same; for, that is certainly not the case. What I am suggesting, however, is that the kinds of difficulties Milbank finds in Niebuhr are exacerbated by the fact that Milbank's interpretation of Niebuhr is off, if only slightly, and that certain features of Niebuhr's interpretation of ethics (naturalism, liberalism, and limited imagination) are then inaccurately represented. Now, however, as we move onto the final section of response to Milbank on Niebuhr, I will make a different type of argument: primarily I will argue that Milbank and Niebuhr are allied on original sin, at least insofar as the interpretation of evil as privative goes, but that what occludes Milbank's conclusions on this point is his mishandling of Niebuhr's work on the topic.

#### 5.9. Niebuhr as Post-Kantian?

Milbank thinks that Niebuhr's work on original sin makes his ethical thought much more appealing to Milbank's own work because it is at this point that Milbank believes Niebuhr to grasp a fuller picture of what an appropriate Christian ethic is, since Niebuhr keys on the notion that original sin is not an "inherited taint" of human finiteness, but a "faulty response" to that finiteness which resides in an imperfect will.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, though Niebuhr appears to have an accurate understanding of the transmission of sin through the human will, he "ends up offering original sin as an *alternative* to historical explanations of the deep-rootedness of human evil"; historical explanations which are described as "the once-and-for-all fall from grace which is the absolute *sine qua non* of Christian ethics and which alone permits a recognition of how history seems driven in the direction of catastrophe".<sup>73</sup> Thus, Milbank thinks Niebuhr's ahistorical location of original sin causes problems for the

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<sup>71</sup> See Aristotle, *On the Soul*, *Parva Naturalia*, *On Breath*, Book III, Chapter I, Trans. by W. S. Hett, (London: William Heninemann Ltd, 1935), pp. 141-145.

<sup>72</sup> Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, p. 243. Niebuhr does speak of original sin as an ideological, rather than inherited taint. See *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. II, pp. 241-244.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 243-244.

later implications about how that sin is realised and what kinds of conclusions it substantiates with regard to certain ideas concerning human nature.

I want primarily to contest two issues here: first, that Niebuhr embodies a post-Kantian structure in his ethics which understands evil as something that can be positively willed; and second, that this association with post-Kantian “radical evil” leads Niebuhr to a position of irresponsibility with regard to the notion of ignorance and culpability in human sin. Aside from a few brief remarks, I am unconcerned with the question of historicity and original sin in Niebuhrian realism, for Milbank rightly perceives that he and Niebuhr are at odds on the idea of an “ontological reality of a lost paradise”.<sup>74</sup> For Niebuhr, “[t]he fall is not historical. It does not take place in any concrete historical act. It is the presupposition of such acts. It deals with an area of human freedom which, when once expressed in terms of an act, is always historically related to a previous act or predisposition”.<sup>75</sup> What Milbank appears to find problematic is Niebuhr's refusal of an ontologically and historically lost paradise which can posit a “first sin”. This leads Milbank to conclude that Niebuhr's location of the fall—not in a particular historical act, but instead in a “pre-human fall which directly affects the life of every human being”<sup>76</sup>—causes Niebuhr to develop an unjustifiably individualistic ethic because the fall is considered in relation to humans individually, rather than collectively. This, according to Milbank, only leads to the bigger problem that an ethic so conceived relies on the false confidences of immaturity and ignorance as scapegoats for the culpability of human evil because individuals are wont to deny responsibility for their unjust decisions.

Milbank's rebuttal of Niebuhr for pardoning human evil by emphasising ignorance and immaturity is strongest in his discussion about the possession of nuclear weapons. There Milbank considers a collection of essays, *The Cross and the Bomb*, to which Niebuhrian Richard Harries contributes. Making the claim that Niebuhrian realism is dependent upon a Stoic conception of ignorance that vitiates the tragic from culpability in, and responsibility for, evil, Milbank writes, “[s]o Niebuhr declares: ‘That we have only a limited capacity to take into account the interests of others is not the sign of some dramatic fall from grace, but an indication

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<sup>74</sup> Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, p.252, n.10.

<sup>75</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “As Deceivers, Yet True”, in *Beyond Tragedy*, p. 11.

<sup>76</sup> Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, p. 243.



of our immaturity' and again, 'we are infants struggling through to maturity rather than perfect beings thrown out of paradise'".<sup>77</sup> At the outset, this appears fully supportive of the kind of criticisms Milbank has thus far brought against Niebuhrian realism. However, Niebuhr never offered either of the quotes Milbank attributes to him. Though he correctly identifies their source (without pagination), the quotes belong to Richard Harries and are given in his essay "Power, Coercion and Morality".<sup>78</sup>

Despite this oversight, if we note Milbank's and Niebuhr's similar starting points concerning the notion of original sin (in the moral agent's will), and also consider the similarities between Milbank's later response to "radical evil" and Niebuhr's own response to particular theories of evil, we see that Milbank's concerns about the seeming lack of responsibility and individualistic emphasis in Niebuhrian realism are misplaced, and act as barriers to a fuller appreciation of Niebuhr's ethic.

As mentioned before, Milbank suggests that Niebuhr's realism is "characteristic of post-Kantian Christian ethics" inasmuch as Niebuhr "constructs a certain notion of the practical through a series of dualisms between individual and public, fact and value, ideal and consequence, which are baseless except as transcriptions of the working values of modern Western society".<sup>79</sup> Milbank's work on "post-Kantianism" is greatest in *Being Reconciled*, where he offers a helpful response to the philosophers of radical evil (Jacob Rogozinski, Slavoj Zizek, and Jean-Luc Nancy), in favour of a theory of evil which is "not seen as a real force or quality, but as the absence of force and quality, and as the privation of being itself".<sup>80</sup> Philosophers of radical evil argue instead that evil, particularly as manifested in the horrors of twentieth century genocides and mass killings

cannot be regarded as privative, because this view claims that evil arises only from the deliberate pursuit of a lesser good. Power directed towards extermination suggests rather destruction and annihilation pursued perversely for its own sake, as an alternative end in itself. Such an impulse towards the pure negation of being, as towards the cold infliction of suffering—that may not even be enjoyed by its perpetrators—suggests that the will to destroy is a positive and

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<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237.

<sup>78</sup> Richard Harries, "Power, Coercion and Morality" in *The Cross and the Bomb: Christian Ethics and the Nuclear Debate*, ed. by Francis Bridger, (London & Oxford: Mowbray, 1983), p. 76.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 245-246.

<sup>80</sup> Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, p. 1.

surd attribute of being itself and no mere inhibition of being in its plenitude.<sup>81</sup>

In other words, against arguments that suggest that evil is the privation of good, radical evil suggest that evil is something that can be willed by the moral agent, as if it is one thing among many to be chosen. Milbank rightly identifies the problem with this claim as one which avoids the responsibility for evil. Evil cannot have a positive quality, or being, in the sense that the philosophers of radical evil declare that possibility, if evil is truly evil. That is,

[f]or evil to be at all, it must still deploy and invoke some good, yet it would like to forget this: evil as positive is evil's own fondest illusion. Insisting in this way upon the pathos of evil and upon its creeping and incremental character by no means, as many fear, involves a taking away from the responsibility of individual wills. On the contrary, this insistence points to the gravity of even the smallest responsibilities and the dangers of apparently good intentions (which it does *not* quite deem as tragically unavoidable); also it does not excuse or regard as inevitable the long-encouraged emergence of 'monstrous' wills. Nor does this insistence tend to deny the unprecedented character of the Holocaust: all that it denies is the notion of a metaphysical revelation of an unexpected ontological status for evil. By contrast, it points to the Holocaust's real disclosure of the terrible capacities of an ancient depravity whose character, nonetheless, retains all too tediously its perennial nature.<sup>82</sup>

That is, we only know that evil is evil when we compare it to what we know to be good. As such, all evil acts must in some sense still possess qualities we would recognise as good.

Despite Milbank's helpful reply to the problems of radical evil, his work on Niebuhr is dissatisfying because of the association of radical evil with Niebuhrian realism. In *The Word Made Strange*, Milbank intends to associate Niebuhr with the characterisation of post-Kantianism offered above, especially as it pertains to a lack of responsibility and culpability in human evil. Concerning this putative deficiency, Milbank notes that "the evils of finitude and immaturity, often strangely and inconsistently co-exists [sic], within 'Christian realism'",<sup>83</sup> an existence which leads to a denial of responsibility, and eventually, optimism. If the moral agent cannot be

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>83</sup> Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, p. 244.

held responsible for the sin her evil action effects because of certain native incapacities, she may breathe a sigh of relief that, in all actuality, she could *not* have done better in whatever moral judgment or act went awry. If categorising Niebuhr as post-Kantian means that he adopts these definitions of evil and responsibility, such an association is shown inaccurate when considering Niebuhr's own remarks on the subject of evil, remarks that anticipate and reflect a strong sympathy with the kind of response Milbank offers to the philosophers of radical evil. Niebuhr agrees that evil cannot be positively willed by the moral agent, and that the moral agent's responsibility and culpability cannot be avoided even in privative theories of evil, specifically with regard to the twentieth century evils manifested in German National Socialism:

Modern religious nationalism is obviously a highly explicit expression of the collective pride in which all human behaviour is involved and which Christian faith regards as the quintessence of sin. Inasfar as this pride issues in specific acts of cruelty, such as the persecution of the Jews, these acts obviously cannot be defined as proceeding from a deliberate and malicious preference for evil in defiance of the good. Yet it would be fallacious to assume that a Nazi gives unqualified devotion to the qualified and conditioned value of his race and nation by a consciously perverse choice of the lesser against the higher good. But it would be equally erroneous to absolve the religious nationalist of responsibility merely because his choice is not consciously perverse.<sup>84</sup>

And again: "Even particular acts of cruelty are probably not the consequence of a conscious love of evil, nor do they find an obvious satisfaction in inflicting pain upon others".<sup>85</sup> That is, evil, for Niebuhr is not exclusive from good, but instead intrinsically tied to it as its necessary concomitant, and is expressed as the privation of good. So, "the possibilities of evil grow with the possibilities of good",<sup>86</sup> but not in the sense that evil grows in ontological status, a positive state of being, such as the one who thinks evil can be positively willed declares. Instead, as the historic substance of good possibilities grows (and the possibilities for good are unlimited even, with Milbank, in the presence of evil as the countermand to evil's negation), the shadow of good's privation perforce grows in response, so that the substance

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<sup>84</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. I, p. 249.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, p. 250.

<sup>86</sup> Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 97.

exists positively (i.e., ontologically) distinct from the shadow's want. And even while good and evil grow as inverses, the culpable are not absolved of responsibility, but are necessarily bound by the consequences of their moral action in such a way that the only truly human response to a moral act is one of responsibility; acknowledgement of guilt where it applies (and humility where the agent thinks a good has been done), and a declaration to make just that which is not. Where this is not achieved, the Niebuhrian realist claims that the failure is not the result of some loosely conceived and inevitable characteristic of immaturity or limited imagination embedded and prescribed in human nature, but is instead precisely the moral agent's desire that those false characterisations were true. Niebuhr, in fact, finds holding ignorance responsible for immorality as implausible as Milbank does:

The self sees the larger structure of value from its own standpoint. Yet this provisional disavowal of moral culpability is never finally convincing. The self's ignorance is never invincible ignorance. It sees beyond itself sufficiently to know that its own interests are not identical with the wider good. If it claims such identity, nevertheless there is an element of moral perversity, and not mere ignorance in the claim....Common sense at least touches the periphery of the mystery of original sin which uncommon sense so easily dismisses.<sup>87</sup>

Note how Niebuhr's refusal to give ignorance the status of scapegoat is linked to a positive appropriation of human imagination as expansive, a feature Milbank finds lacking in Niebuhrian realism, as mentioned earlier.

The failure, then, of moral agency and the pervasiveness of sin are most adequately expressed as an incomprehensible paradox for Niebuhr. Realism for Niebuhr is at once the attempt to consider all perspectives, and at the same time to accept responsibility for moral failures while expecting that those failures are perennial to human life and is only finally remedied by God. Embracing such realism is the most sufficient response to the paradox of human sin. Though responsibility in moral action is interpreted differently by Niebuhr than it is by Milbank,<sup>88</sup> it is inaccurate, as I have suggested here, to claim Niebuhr as post-

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<sup>87</sup> Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, pp. 107-108.

<sup>88</sup> It seems at this point that Niebuhr would be inclined to include Milbank in the group he refers to as "biblical idealists" in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, a group he thinks possesses "genuine alternatives and the critical insights of prophetic religion, but [that is] too unyielding in their commitments to these "illusions" to offer any guidance for the real choices". See Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, pp. 98-99 and Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, pp. 276-277.



Kantian and morally irresponsible. What obtains from Milbank's depiction of Niebuhr as Stoically pagan, liberal, unimaginative, and adherent to a predetermined anthropology, is a representation of Niebuhrian realism as finally hopeless, rather than morally realistic. The question then becomes whether Niebuhrian realism can even be classified as a theological ethic; for without hope, what distinguishes this ethic from any other form of philosophical ethical enquiry? I would suggest that Niebuhrian realism accurately interpreted reveals an ethic reliant on twentieth-century ethical naturalism which serves as a basis for neither pessimism nor optimism, but for theological hope. Before answering the question of how naturalism and hope are related, though, it is appropriate to offer a few words concluding our response to Milbank's interpretation of Niebuhr.

#### *5.10. Conclusions*

We have considered Milbank's conclusions about Niebuhr's realism and found them lacking on two counts. First, Milbank inaccurately represents Christian realism with a kind of Stoic naturalism in Niebuhr's thought. While it is true that there are certain features of Niebuhrian realism that are similar to Stoic conceptions of the natural law, Niebuhr is ultimately critical of Stoicism. Secondly, Milbank's argument that Niebuhr adheres to a post-Kantian appreciation of evil misses the broader point that Niebuhr and Milbank are actually closely aligned with each other on the issue of evil.

If we accept Milbank's criticisms of Niebuhr, we likewise accept a latent hopelessness in Christian realism. That is, Milbank's presentation leaves little room for an understanding of Christian realism as an ethic grounded on a foundation which can offer the realist a way of thinking theologically about hope. If this is correct, we have good reason to suggest that Christian realism is not actually a *Christian* ethic; for it is hope that God will overcome the fractious incidents of human existence that gives us a basis for Christian ethics in the first place. This, I think, is the central problem with Milbank's interpretation of Niebuhr. As we now move on to the second part of the thesis, we will consider the ways in which the framework of Christian realism presents the Christian realist a way for thinking hopefully about our task as moral agents and about the broken world in which we currently live.

## **Part II: Theological Hope**

## Chapter Six

### TRANSCENDENT HOPE

#### *6.1 Abstract*

In this chapter we will focus on the topic of theological hope in Christian realism. It is impossible to give an account of theological hope in Niebuhr's realism without also accounting for the Christology in his theology. As such we will focus on those two areas for the next two chapters, which are the most important investigations carried out in the thesis. In this chapter we will begin with a discussion of the "impossibility" of theological hope, differentiating between what I call "essential" and "existential" versions of hope. We will then consider the role that the person of Christ plays in a realist interpretation of hope, and we will observe how, for Niebuhr, Christ occupies the place of objectivity (the "form") of the realist discussions from the first part of the thesis. The chapter will conclude with a discussion about how we move from Christology to theological hope.

#### *6.2 Introduction*

We have already made the claim that the framework of Christian realism provides a foundation for theological hope. Part one of this thesis provided a description and explored the key features of that framework. We focused on the notion of objectivity in Christian realism in chapters two and three, and on the dimensions of human existence in chapters four and five. We will now move on to our discussion of theological hope.

This chapter and the next are thus important for two reasons. First, they rely on the framework of part one to explore both objective and existential dimensions of hope. Both approaches to hope are ultimately related to Niebuhr's Christology. Second, Niebuhr, as we will see in the discussion about the World Council of Churches' 1954 meeting, is not often thought of as a hopeful theologian. This, I think, is not a fair assessment. Realistic approaches to ethics are sometimes mistaken for pessimism or cynicism, which is certainly true in the case of Christian realism. As suggested in the second chapter, it is theological hope that gives the critical distance between Niebuhr's Christian moral realism and other either secular, or more generalised versions of moral realism. In other words, it is hope that makes Niebuhrian realism theological, or even Christian, in the first place. It will therefore

be the burden of this chapter and the next to give an account of the reasons that Niebuhr's Christian realism offers framework for a theologically hopeful ethic. Let us now turn to that task.

### *6.3. Is Hope Ethical?*

For the Christian realist, hope is both essential and existential. That is, when the realist hopes for something, she recognises that she is hoping out of her particular existential contexts and placing her hope in the essential reality of God. But can hope, theologically understood, be ethical? I do not here mean to ask whether or not the *act* of hoping for something can in itself be a moral or immoral act. We can argue for and against this interpretation. For example, in most circumstances, we are likely to say that to "hope" for another's public demise is an immoral act, while "hoping" for stability in the Middle East is a moral act. Granted, these are both nominal acts inasmuch as neither actually accomplishes much in terms of bringing about public demise or achieving stability in the Middle East, but they are indicative of particular moral dispositions, and the disposition of the moral agent is an important consideration in moral judgment.

What I am asking is whether or not the discussion of what it is that we do when we hope for something can plausibly be included in discussions about ethics. That is, can discussions about what is good, right or just lead us to further questions about what is to be hoped for in relation to these moral descriptors? Before that question can be answered, it is important to define what is meant by the term hope in the first place.

#### *6.3.1. For What May We Hope?*

Hope is not hope unless that which is hoped for is impossible. It is illogical for me to hope for those things which, by virtue of something like my own efforts, or the manipulation of my co-workers, can be achieved.

Nobody says that he is 'hoping' for something that he can produce or obtain himself....People hope that there might never be another world war; they hope for a good harvest, for the prosperity of their children, for a long life, and so on. What is common to all these everyday expressions is quite clear: what is hoped for is always something over which the one who hopes has no real power—perhaps he can do a little to help things along, but regarding what is decisive he is powerless; he cannot simply cause, generate, manufacture, produce,



or create the thing hoped for. Were that not the case, then no sensible person would speak of hope.<sup>1</sup>

Hope is likewise not hope if the thing hoped for happens naturally. For example, I might say that I “hope” for nightfall, but “does one ‘hope’ for the arrival of night? Nobody would say such a thing. One does not ‘hope’ for something that occurs anyway and necessarily, and particularly not for something that one is convinced will necessarily come about”.<sup>2</sup> In other words, we can only hope for those things that we do not already know will happen.

In the negative sense, then, the object of hope is neither something which can be achieved by my own efforts, nor is it a natural event whose occurrence I can either hasten or prevent. More positively, it would seem that hope has both transhistorical and historical dimensions to it. On the one hand, hope transcends history because its referent is that which cannot be accomplished within history. On the other hand—and paradoxically—the referent of hope is that which can be realised in history, but not by the lone efforts of the one who hopes for it. In this case, the object of hope requires a reciprocal relationship between those who hope for something and those who bear some ability to bring that thing about. For example, when I hope for the safe birth of my son and an uneventful labour for my wife, I am placing those hopes in those people who bear responsibility for bringing those events about. In other words, hopes within history are those ordinary hopes which place a moral obligation on the moral agents involved.

There is, then, a distinction between kinds of hope, particularly between kinds of theological hope. First, if I say that I hope for something that cannot be realised within history, I identify my hope with a kind of essentialism; I place my hope in an essence beyond history. This is not an otherworldly hope that envisions fanciful end-times dramas with rote scripts and automatons as actors. Otherworldly dramas are not beyond history; they are alternative, false histories. Neither does saying that my hope is placed in an essence beyond history mean that my hope is therefore irrelevant to present history. Theologically, to say that my hope is in that which is essentially beyond history means that my hope is in that essence which

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<sup>1</sup> Josef Pieper, *Hope and History: Five Salzburg Lectures*, trans. by David Kipp, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1967), p. 23.

gives me my existence, God, and so is fundamentally bound to all history, because all existence is derived from this essence. For the Christian, to place hope theologically in the essence of God who gives existence is to say that our hope is in the essence of God-in-Christ, “[f]or from him and through him and to him are all things”.<sup>3</sup> As Niebuhr puts it, God “is the source of every aspect of existence”.<sup>4</sup>

Second, to say that my hope is in that which *is* realisable in history means that I identify my hope with a kind of existentialism. That is, my hope is placed in something that can be realised within the exigencies of historical contexts. Again, though, this does not mean that my hope is unrelated to that essence which is beyond history. Even to be able to possess an existential hope of this sort presupposes that hope is already related to that from which existence is derived, the essence of God.

But to say that hope is both beyond history and within history might appear an aporetic device intended to confuse the issue, or even to avoid giving a theological definition of hope in the first place. The point, though, is that by saying that hope is both essential and existential we are emphasising that, for the realist, there are different kinds of hope. In the first instance, what I have here referred to as essential hope, Pieper describes as “fundamental hope” (a term he takes from the research of Herbert Plügge). Fundamental hope is “the hope for one sort of thing, whose loss would mean that [the one who hopes] had absolutely no more hope and would be purely and simply ‘without hope’”.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, what I have here referred to as existential hope is similar to “the ‘ordinary’ or ‘everyday’ hopes...that are directed toward something ‘in the worldly future’, toward an ‘object belonging to the world’, toward something presumed to come to us from the outside, whether it be a communication, a success, a useful commodity, or even a restoration of health”.<sup>6</sup> The distinction, then, is that essentialist, or “fundamental” hope “appears to have no object that can be found to exist in the world in this ‘objectlike’ way”.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Rom. 11:36. Commenting on this verse, Augustine makes the same point, saying, “[a]ccordingly, my God, I would have no being, I would not have existence, unless you were in me. Or rather, I would have no being if I were not in you...”. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. by. Henry Chadwick, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, p. 53.

<sup>5</sup> Pieper, pp. 25-26.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 27.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*.

Theological hope thus embodies both of these essentialist and existentialist characteristics. That is, the one who puts hope in the essence of God-in-Christ does not do so at the expense of her citizenship in a world that continues to hope in false absolutes. The Christian realist does not exchange essential hope for existential hope because this realist acknowledges that it is only in the contexts of human existence that we can understand what it means to hope for something in the first place. That is, they recognise that “[w]hile the gospel which we preach reveals a world which in its ground and its fulfilment transcends human history, it does not abstract us from this present history with all of its conflicts and tragic disappointments of arrogant hopes”.<sup>8</sup> It is with this definition that we can move forward as we attempt to define what it means for the Christian moral realist to be hopeful.

#### *6.4. Frustrated Hopes: Impossible Utopias?*

Some difficulties present themselves when theological hope is defined as existential, as that which hopes for what is said to be realisable in history. First, if it is true that existential hope is that which is realisable in history, why is it that injustice is not overcome, sin not eradicated? Why is something like the social gospel of Rauschenbusch, as discussed in chapter two, which claims that the kingdom of God can be realised in history, a frustrated utopia, an unrealisable hope in history? Second, the existential emphasis in this regard seems to abnegate our primary statement that hope is not hope unless that which is hoped for is impossible.

With regard to the first objection, the answer Niebuhr initially gives for why a utopia like Rauschenbusch’s is frustrated is that such utopian visions do not take seriously the problem of sin. This is true as far as it goes, but the more fundamental problem is that the definitions given both to “history” and “hope” are false definitions. To hope for the eradication of sin within history *as we now know and experience it* is to give a definition to history which is unrealistic in the first place. It is to understand history as “unfallen”, which is to confuse the issue of what history really is. The problems with Rauschenbusch’s hope for utopia-within-history would be lessened if he construed historical life similarly to the way Bonhoeffer does with

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<sup>8</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Christian Church in a Secular Age”, in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 85.

what Bonhoeffer calls “natural life”.<sup>9</sup> Bonhoeffer tells us that “[n]atural life is formed life. The natural is the form that inheres in and serves life. If life severs itself from this form, if it will not allow itself to be served by the form of the natural, then it destroys itself down to its roots. Life that makes itself absolute, that makes itself its own goal, destroys itself”.<sup>10</sup> This is a realist statement. It is also a statement with which Niebuhr agrees.<sup>11</sup> “It is interesting”, writes Niebuhr of this tendency to be severed from the natural form of life, “how every religion which imparts a superficial meaning to life, and grounds that meaning in a dubious sanctity, finally issues in despair. Those who make the family their god must despair when the family is proved to be only a little less mortal than the individual”.<sup>12</sup>

The natural, then, is life which independently exists from human conceptions about it. It is also, however, the life to which all human existence is drawn, and the essence out of which all existence is borne. Natural life, in other words, is true life. The point is that the natural life is life-in-its-essence; life as it ought to be. Put theologically, the natural life is life-in-God, which *is* the natural order of life, but *is not* life as we now experience or know it to be. In other words:

The natural is that form of life preserved by God for the fallen world that is directed toward justification, salvation, and renewal through Christ...The natural can never be a construct of some part or some authority in the fallen world. Neither the individual nor any community or institution in the preserved world can set and decide what is natural. It has already been set and decided....<sup>13</sup>

The part of life that is preserved is that place where essence and existence meet, the place of what Niebuhr recognises as human transcendence. In other words, where essence and existence meet is the place where the human is free to transcend herself infinitely, and where she also knows that she is not as free as she originally

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<sup>9</sup> Lovin gives an account of the similarities between Bonhoeffer and Niebuhr, particularly on their theologies of responsibility as the foundation for understanding meaningful moral life. See *Christian Realism and the New Realities*, chapter six.

<sup>10</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 6, ed. by Clifford J. Green, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), p. 178.

<sup>11</sup> It is not insignificant that Bonhoeffer studied with Niebuhr at Union Theological Seminary prior to his return to Germany and subsequent confrontations with German National Socialism. Though “Bonhoeffer resisted Niebuhr’s [teachings]...once back in Germany [he] found himself more and more drawn to questions of politics and ethics—perhaps in part because of Niebuhr’s example”. Fox, pp. 125-126.

<sup>12</sup> “The Christian Church in a Secular Age”, p. 84.

<sup>13</sup> Bonhoeffer, pp. 174-175.



believed. It is therefore the place where the human discovers that freedom is never so absolute as once imagined; it is only relative freedom. When "this relative freedom is misused a given entity in the fallen world sets itself up as absolute, declares itself to be the source of the natural, and thereby corrodes natural life".<sup>14</sup> Niebuhr makes the same point when he says that "[t]he problem of the individual...cannot be solved at all if the height is not achieved where the Sovereign source and end of both individual and communal existence are discerned, and where the limits are set against the idolatrous self-worship of both individuals and communities".<sup>15</sup> Put differently, it is the discovery that God is the source of human existence by which the human realises the limits of self-transcendence and against which self-idolatry sins. Part of the problem with utopian visions such as Rauschenbusch's which argue that the kingdom of God can be realised historically, then, is that they confuse the simulacrum of life ("unnatural" life; life as it is now) for real life ("unfallen" life; life as it is supposed to be).

To the objection that an emphasis on existential hope necessarily leads to an emphasis on utopian visions that will be perennially frustrated, the Christian realist responds that this happens only in those circumstances where the moral agent confuses her definition of history, and exchanges the unnatural for the natural life. A portion of the answer to the question of why injustice and human sin are not overcome for the one who, like Rauschenbusch, hopes for utopia-in-history, then, is that this person has misidentified what history really is. Theological hope defined as existential can only be related to history which is as yet incomplete. That is, true history is to be identified with God, but with the God who absconds, the *Deus absconditus*.<sup>16</sup> The hopeful and realistic Christian, then, must place her hope in a history which stands independently (and with God) of her conceptions about it, in the same way that goodness stands independently of the moral realist's conceptions about it.

The other part of the problem is that utopian visions confuse definitions of hope. Just as the utopian exchanges unnatural for natural life, he also exchanges

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p. 176.

<sup>15</sup> Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, A Vindication of Democracy and Critique of Its Traditional Defenders*, (London: Nisbet & Co., Ltd, 1945), p. 62.

<sup>16</sup> Cf., Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, p. 116.

existential for essential hope. The act of hoping for that which is not possible in history—essential hoping—is transmuted into hoping only for those things which cannot transcend history—existential hoping. The problem is not that one type of hope is given primacy over the other; the problem is that these hopes are wrongly ordered, and thus misidentified. For the Christian realist, essential hope coincides with natural life, while existential hope coincides with unnatural life. The order is inverted for the utopian. Essential hope coincides with unnatural life, while existential hope coincides with natural life. What obtains is nostalgia for the realist, sentimentality for the utopian. Let us take just a moment to consider the differences between nostalgia and sentimentality, and their respective relations to essential and existential hope.

#### 6.5. *Catastrophic Hope: Nostalgia and Sentimentality*

To Niebuhr, sentimentality is a blight on the potency of the Christian faith for effective social participation.<sup>17</sup> The sentimentalist is one who, like the utopian, “has insisted that the law of love is a simple possibility when every experience proves that the real problem of our existence lies in the fact that we ought to love one another, but do not”.<sup>18</sup> What results from this disposition is a false hope because “Christians fatuously hope that Christian conference will speak some simple moral word which will resolve by love the tragic conflict in the world community”.<sup>19</sup> Meaningless hope leads only to a new form of legalism in which “[t]he most opportunistic statesman, who recognizes the complexities which this sentimentality obscures, is a publican who may enter the Kingdom of God before the Phariseeism which imagines that we can lift ourselves above the tragic moral ambiguities of our existence by a simple act of the will”.<sup>20</sup> Sentimental hope is hope which looks at the love of God-in-Christ and thinks that with just a little more effort, such love can be reproduced. Not only are

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<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, Hauerwas thinks Niebuhr’s Christology is infected with sentimentality. “Christ was...the symbol of sacrificial love for Niebuhr”, says Hauerwas, “but the very language of symbol was used to protect against any need to make classical christological claims that require trinitarian displays of who God is. So in spite of Niebuhr’s reputation as one who attempted a recovery of orthodoxy, his account of God remained more theist than Christian—that is, a theism combined with a sentimental Christ”. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2000), p. 34. I am not certain what Hauerwas means by “trinitarian displays of who God is”, but I think the point he misses is that Niebuhr did not seek to protect classical Christological claims with a veneer of “symbolic” language, but instead used symbolic language, assuming the truth of these claims.

<sup>18</sup> Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, p. 109.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

the definitions of hope wrongly ordered for the utopian sentimentalist; the impossibility of the things for which essential hope hopes is denied. The utopian is guilty of this kind of hope.<sup>21</sup>

Recall the discussion of mimesis in chapter four,<sup>22</sup> where we noted that remembering the past does not mean that we can mimetically reproduce the past in the sense that past experiences can be replicated as they once were. Moral imagination allows us to remember the past, while at the same time “creating” new history based on our past experiences. But history as we once knew and experienced it can never be mimicked; what we once knew and experienced remains in the past and, though we may have memory of the past, we are incapable of the complete restoration of the past. That is, we cannot incarnate what no longer exists. This is what the utopian does not acknowledge, and what the Christian realist calls tragic. Where the utopian is sentimental, the Christian realist is nostalgic.

What makes Christian realism’s hope nostalgic is the tragic nature of our memories. There is a pain (*nostos*= “return home”; *algos*= “pain”)—a longing for something that cannot be repossessed—in nostalgic remembrance that is not present in sentimentalism. Our lives in the present are only vestigial remnants of what once was (though this makes the present no less real). Thus, when we observe the Eucharist, we painfully remember Christ’s life—or, more literally, Christ’s *living*, his blood and flesh—through the partaking of wine and loaf as representations of that life. But our remembrances are never re-memberings because we cannot reconstitute what once was. All experience is finite and temporal and the past cannot be recreated. Thus, the unnatural is only a signifier of what is natural. Bread is not flesh and wine is not blood, but taken in the context of the Eucharist, these elements signify the natural life, the essentialness of Christ. All Easter celebrations are

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, Niebuhr actually thinks that Rauschenbusch’s social gospel goes some way toward correcting the kind of sentimentality that Niebuhr identifies with “pietistic” and “bourgeois” individualism. This kind of sentimentality embraces Christian sectarianism and believes itself “absolved of any concern for establishing justice in the intricacies of of an ever-growing technical society”. What is different between utopian sentimentality and pietistic sentimentality is that the latter abandons the aims of the former altogether. Rather than differentiating between essential and existential hope, the bourgeois sentimentalist sees no need for existential hoping in the first place. What the social gospel achieves is “a welcome release from this moral and spiritual complacency. [It] insisted on the Christian’s responsibility for justice in the community....Unfortunately [it] was not a fully sophisticated approach to social issues”. See Niebuhr, *Essays in Applied Christianity*, pp. 102-103.

likewise painful because it is in our remembrances of the resurrected Christ that we know resurrection follows death; and, consequently, we remember that our lives must end in our deaths. Moreover, resurrection does not recreate what we once knew and experienced. Even the resurrected Christ was not Christ as the disciples knew and experienced him (Matt. 24:15-16), but he was still the essential Christ. As Niebuhr's predecessor in Christian realism, John Bennett says, "all that we know of the event [of the resurrection] is that visions of Christ after His death were the means by which the disciples became assured of what was essentially true—the *continuing presence of God as the Living Christ and as the Spirit in the work that Jesus had begun*".<sup>23</sup> Death, in other words, is the ultimate sign of the unnatural life, and it is this unnatural life which instils in us the sense that things are not as they ought to be.

But the tragic nature of nostalgia does not usher in despair. The hope of the Christian realist is grounded in faith, which "can survive the vicissitudes of history, can rescue human existence from the despair in which it is periodically involved by its sinful pretensions, and the tragic disappointment of its facile hopes [i.e., "utopian sentimentalism"]".<sup>24</sup> More specifically, though, what nostalgic hope has us longing for is the fulfilment of all of our essential and existential hopes, which can only happen in the person of Christ, who makes possible those impossible things for which we hope in the first place. Nostalgic hope is neither solely past, nor future-oriented. When we long for something from our past (e.g., an experience from our youth, the memory of time spent with a spouse who is now deceased, etc.), we long in such a way that we yearn for those things to be a part of who we are now and who we will be in the future. Nostalgic hope, then, is the combination of both existential and essential hopes. That is, the things for which we hope are possible because we can have new experiences. But they are also impossible because these experiences can never be the same as they once were. Theological hope is hope that recognises the nature of essential and existential hopes, and associates them with the natural and unnatural life, respectively. Furthermore, as stated above, theological hope is hope in the essence which gives us our existence, God-in-Christ, who is the "impossible possibility". Hope, then, takes on a paradoxical character that the Christian realist

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<sup>22</sup> See pp. 97-99.

<sup>23</sup> John C. Bennett, *Christian Realism*, pp. 137-138. Underlined word mine; italics Bennett's.

<sup>24</sup> Niebuhr, "The Christian Church in a Secular Age", pp. 84-85.



can appreciate. Niebuhr, in fact, identifies Christ as a paradox of the sentimental and nostalgic hoper. "If Jesus ever had a faith in the possibility of making the love ideal progressively applicable to the present world [as in utopian sentimentalism], it belonged to the early days of his ministry and was transmuted into a catastrophic hope as his own cross became imminent".<sup>25</sup> What Niebuhr calls catastrophic hope, and what I have called essential hope—hope that is placed in the essence of God-in-Christ—is precisely the kind of hope which hopes for that which is impossible. Niebuhr's Christology is thus obviously important to consider in order better to understand the role of essential hope in Christian realism. We will now take a moment to make this consideration.

#### 6.6. "*Christ, the Hope of the World*"

Around the time when Niebuhr's mature theology was coming into focus, the World Council of Churches (WCC) held its Second General Assembly in 1954 in Evanston, Illinois on the theme, "Christ, the Hope of the World". It is not surprising that, following the turbulent decades and both World Wars (the second of which forced the postponement of the official establishment of the WCC to 1948, after the war's end in 1948), hope was selected as the theme for the meeting. Given the tenuous post-war political climate and the escalation of the Cold War, the WCC undertook the task of proclaiming Christian hope to a fractured world. The advisory commission's report on the theme of the assembly makes this point clear:

We live at a time when very many are without hope. Many have lost the hopes they had for earthly progress. Many cling with the strength of fanaticism to hopes which their own sober reason cannot justify. Multitudes ask themselves, 'What is coming to the world? What is in front of us? What may we look forward to?' The answer to those questions has been given to us in the Gospel.<sup>26</sup>

The theme was selected with the aim that it would "help the churches in their relations with one another, and in their relations to the contemporary world. It [was to] help them to face the world's problems and make clear to the world that its problems are being faced".<sup>27</sup> Theologians from Europe and North America assisted

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<sup>25</sup> Niebuhr, *Reflections on the End of an Era*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934).

p. 212.

<sup>26</sup> "Report of the Advisory Commission on the Main Theme" in *Christ-The Hope of the World: Documents on the Main Theme of the Second Assembly*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1954), p. 7.

<sup>27</sup> David P. Gaines, *The World Council of Churches: A Study of Its Background and History*, (Peterborough: The Richard R. Smith Co. Inc., 1966), p. 566.

in the selection of the theme for the assembly, including notable names such as Emil Brunner, Karl Barth and both H. Richard and Reinhold Niebuhr, a group which was given the appellation of “the 25 hopeless theologians”.<sup>28</sup> As a participant in the selection of the theme in a 1950 meeting, Niebuhr

proposed that the doctrine of redemption be considered, which, he explained, combined the eternal message of the gospel with the immediate needs of the world. ‘We are confronted actually with false schemes of redemption, which contain proximate solutions but are not based upon any ultimate solution,’ he said. ‘We tend to deal with the ultimate and disregard the proximate. In the Christian doctrine of redemption we should be confronted with both’.<sup>29</sup>

Ultimately, however, the theme of redemption was not included in the 1954 conference, which may be one of the reasons Niebuhr was so displeased with the final selection of the committee. In an article leading up to the meeting in Evanston entitled “What Hope?”, *Time* magazine, which refers to Niebuhr as the “pessimistic Theologian”, notes his displeasure with the selected theme, which he thought “was a bad idea in the first place”. Wrote *Time*:

It is silly, thinks Niebuhr, to advertise Christianity by insisting on what, to the secular-minded, will seem ‘fantastic’, i.e., the Second Coming. ‘The New Testament eschatology is at once too naive for a sophisticated world and too sophisticated for the simple-minded modern man, who has become so accustomed to trying to make sense out of life by measuring history in terms of some scheme of rational intelligibility....While the present seems a very strategic era in which to restore a part of the New Testament faith which had become discredited and obscured, we need only to analyze the needs of our generation to recognize that it is not particularly redemptive to approach a disillusioned generation with a proud ‘I told you so’ and a fanciful picture of the end of history, or at least a picture which will seem fanciful to our generation....What would be more to the point is to bear witness to our faith in terms...of watchfulness and soberness ... of faith and of love—which will appeal to a world in the night of despair as having some gleams of light in it, derived from the ‘Light that shineth in darkness’.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> David A. S. Fergusson, “John Baillie: Orthodox Liberal” in David Fergusson (ed.), *Christ, Church and Society: Essays on John Baillie and Donald Baillie*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), p. 153, n. 76. Niebuhr was unhappy that Barth, with whom he already shared a fragile relationship, was participating in the WCC discussions. Fergusson points out that Lesslie Newbigin recalls of the WCC discussions that “Niebuhr...was so incensed by Barth that he threatened to walk out...”. *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Gaines, p. 567. It is significant that Niebuhr made this recommendation because, as we will see later in this chapter, the concept of redemption is bound to his understanding of Christological hope.

<sup>30</sup> “What Hope?” in *Time*, June 28, 1954. No author given.

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,860894,00.html>

In other words, Niebuhr was discouraged by the committee's decision to focus solely on hope as eschatological. The problem was that he thought that the relationship of the church to society and the need for rapprochement between the two was of utmost importance in those years following the Second World War. His main concern, I think, was that the WCC not dither with meaningless interpretations of theological doctrine (in this case, eschatology) at the expense of true social effectiveness.<sup>31</sup> This much is made evident in an article written prior to the Evanston assembly in *The Ecumenical Review*, in which he asked, "Is [the theme] to 'establish the brethren' and create the broadest and most satisfactory biblical basis for our ecumenical consensus? Or is the purpose of an ecumenical meeting to bear witness to our faith in the world? That can hardly be our primary purpose but no one can deny that what is said at the Assembly will be overheard in the world and will be meant to be overheard".<sup>32</sup>

The problem, to Niebuhr, with the theme of the conference was one of relevance. To focus sole attention on eschatological hope would be to cloister the assembly into a self-contained dialogue which was baseless for those who did not share the same vocabulary as the ecumenical participants. But had the ecumenical assembly opted instead to focus on the theme of redemption, Niebuhr would not have questioned its relevance; for, all are in need of redemption, but not all are in need of a theory of eschatology. The difference, in Niebuhr's mind, boiled down to what was previously distinguished as essential and existential hopes.

This is made clear in another article that Niebuhr wrote for *Religion in Life*, prior to the Evanston assembly. There Niebuhr delineates between what I have called existential and essential hopes and he associates them with North American and continental European theologians, respectively. Niebuhr notes that the continental theologians, "who were chiefly responsible for formulating the theme" of the conference, did so in order to counteract North American theological understandings of hope, which were "a form of secularism". The continental

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<sup>31</sup> Remember Niebuhr's claim from chapter two that disagreements over metaphysics were to be put aside for "moral potency".

<sup>32</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Hope Needs Faith and Love", *The Ecumenical Review*, vol. 5, no. 4 (July 1953): 363. Cited in Edward Duff, *The Social Thought of the World Council of Churches*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1956), p. 301.

theologians sought to “replace [the theme] with a biblical account of Christ’s second coming, which in America [would be] regarded as a purely illusory projection of hope to the ‘end of history’, which cultured Christians had left to literalistic sects to claim as their article of faith”.<sup>33</sup>

North American theologians embodied existential hopes because of the emphasis they placed on the notion that the things for which we hope are historically realisable. Much like the utopianism of Rauschenbusch, Niebuhr saw the North American theologians as naïve sentimentalists. In contrast, continental theologians exemplified essential hope because their understanding of hope was coupled with a transhistorical interpretation that claims hope comes only at the end of history in the eschatos. Niebuhr was dissatisfied with both approaches, but particularly with the latter, because he thought that the exclusive emphasis on eschatological language bore no relevance to the rest of the world. “The New Testament eschatology is at once too naïve for a sophisticated world and too sophisticated for the simple-minded modern man, who has become so accustomed to try to make sense out of life by measuring history in terms of some scheme of rational intelligibility”.<sup>34</sup> What was needed, therefore, was a *via media* which could navigate the pitfalls of sentimentalism on the one hand, and the irrelevance of biblical literalism on the other. This Niebuhr located in an emphasis on Christ.

Niebuhr interpreted the WCC’s choice of the theme of hope as problematic because of the eschatological definition given to hope, not because the assembly associates this kind of hope with Christ. Granting that the WCC sought relevance to society through the theme, Niebuhr yet suggested that “the witness of faith, and of love as a fruit of faith, is more important than the witness of hope”.<sup>35</sup> The problem is one of meaning. No sense of life’s meaning can be made for one who does not understand what it means to have faith in that essence which is beyond history.

The situation seems to be that the Christian faith affirms that the drama of each individual life and of the whole human enterprise is played on a larger stage than the one-dimensional nature-history which the historians chart...The only real but important proof of such an affirmation is that the human self transcends all the sovereignties

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<sup>33</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Christ, the Hope of the World: What Has History to Say?”, in *Essays in Applied Christianity*, p. 323.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p. 329.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, p. 327.



which are known, and that life does not make any sense if it is measured in the dimension of the 'wisdom of the world'. We are either driven to despair by its meaninglessness or to various types of madness by trying to make sense out of it from our own standpoint.<sup>36</sup>

In other words, it is faith—specifically, faith in the essence of God-in-Christ—whence life derives its meaning. Only once this is recognised can any discussion of essential hope be maintained because Christ is the basis of essential hope. We should not read Niebuhr's insinuation that love trumps hope to mean that hope is consequently irrelevant. Hope only becomes irrelevant when it is tied to other irrelevancies. For instance, as Niebuhr sees particular interpretations of eschatology as irrelevant, so also he sees hope that is tied to those interpretations as irrelevant. Therefore, though WCC's theme was "an effort to recall the Church to the hope as expressed in the New Testament" and was arrived at in "an appropriate era in which to make [this] attempt",<sup>37</sup> the theme of eschatology was, nevertheless, "faulty statesmanship, if it was the concern of the Church to bear witness to its faith before the world".<sup>38</sup>

The role of Christ, then, is important to Niebuhr. With regard to the WCC, had the emphasis on eschatology been replaced by a role on the hopeful redemption found in faith in Christ, Niebuhr would not have thought the assembly's theme so troublesome.

This excursus on the 1954 WCC meeting has been beneficial in terms of locating Niebuhr's understanding of hope in historical contexts. But it has also helped to point to the fact that that Christ is significant for Niebuhr's theological understanding of hope, a hope which is neither exclusively essentialist nor existentialist, but is an amalgamation of both.

This Christological emphasis is worth exploring in detail because it both revisits the earlier discussions of moral realism and ethical naturalism, and anticipates the discussion to come in the final chapter. We will thus spend the remainder of this chapter on the Christological hope in Christian realism.

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 339.

### 6.7. Niebuhr's Christology

The WCC locates Niebuhr's understanding of hope historically and it points to the fact that Christology is important for understanding Niebuhr on hope. It was stated in chapter two that in order for realism to be considered theological, it required some sort of metaphysical basis to which it must appeal in order to validate its claims. Without metaphysics, our claims about what is good, right or just become for us little more than claims based on our own conceptions of goodness, rightness and justness. They become, in other words, anti-realist. In the same way, in order for hope to be considered a realistic hope—particularly a *theologically* realistic hope—it must be grounded in something which transcends the act of hoping in the first place. Otherwise our hope devolves into sentimentalism.

For Niebuhr, I think the person of Christ saves Christian realism from sentimentalism, while at the same time providing a basis for the kind of nostalgic hope that incorporates elements of both essentialism and existentialism into realism's understanding of what it means to hope theologically.<sup>39</sup> In other words, it is Christ on whom the entirety of Niebuhr's theological and ethical thought depends for its coherence. This, of course, is how it has to be if we are going to call Niebuhrian realism Christian realism in the first place. But there are distinctions to Niebuhr's Christology which need to be considered. I want here to focus specifically on two things: "paradoxical" Christology in Niebuhr's thought, and the notion of Christ as the "form" for a realistic hope. Let us turn our attention to those areas of discussion now.

#### 6.7.1. *Paradoxical Christology: Who is Christ for Niebuhr?*

Criticisms of Niebuhr's Christology have resulted in a notion almost quotidian that Niebuhr's account of the person of Christ is little more than a retelling of the liberal narrative which claims that Christ was a human uniquely in touch with his calling as a representative of God, but (only) a human nonetheless. Thus, the

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<sup>39</sup> I am grateful to Kevin Carnahan for pointing me to the importance of Christology in Niebuhr's realism. Carnahan has offered a compelling account of the "The Recovery of Christology" in Niebuhr's thought, and has linked Niebuhr theologically both to Rauschenbusch and Barth. See Kevin Carnahan, *Sin, Guilt, Justice and War: Paul Ramsey and Reinhold Niebuhr on the Moral Framework for Just War Thought*, Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Southern Methodist University, UMI Number: 3258700, pp. 54-61.

incarnation is merely symbolic for Niebuhr. This reading of Niebuhr's theology has been popularised in the last few years, but it is not new.<sup>40</sup> Even during Niebuhr's life, some conservative critics hastened to point out that his theology lacked a sufficient (read, "orthodox") Christology. In 1951, for example, Edward Carnell suggested that Niebuhr's Christology commences in the right direction because, for Niebuhr, "Christ is 'the Son of God' as well as the second Adam...".<sup>41</sup> As such, Christ is both a moral exemplar and the incarnated son of God. Nevertheless, according to Carnell, because he cannot hold the dual-natured Christ in tension, "[w]ith obsequiousness, Niebuhr bows to both his liberal training and Kierkegaard, for in both traditions a metaphysical statement of the incarnation is viewed as absolutely paradoxical and a final offense to reason".<sup>42</sup> What results for Niebuhr, thinks Carnell, is the wholesale abandonment of orthodox Christology. "In other words, the Jesus of history appears merely to be a convenient locus to pin the Christ symbol to....But one must note that if Socrates had been more consistent in his life and a little more successful in his oracular contacts with eternity, he could just as well serve as the symbol of our faith. Our faith", continues Carnell, "then would be the 'Socratic faith', and our hope, not the cross, but 'the flask of hemlock'".<sup>43</sup>

Around the same time of Carnell's criticisms, others defended Niebuhr's Christology as the lynchpin to his entire theological and ethical thought. Chief among these is Niebuhr's contemporary, Paul Lehmann, who writes that

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<sup>40</sup> Cf., Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, p. 126. where he writes that "Niebuhr's 'Christology' begins and ends with his understanding of the cross as the historical revelation of God's love, which always transcends history. In Jesus we see a 'remarkable coincidence of purpose and act' because of his uncompromising conformity to God's will without reference to the relativities of the human situation. The animating purpose of his life was to conform to the *agape* of God". In this sense, Hauerwas thinks Niebuhr's Christology is reminiscent of theological liberalism's Christology which saw in Christ the "Christ of history" over against the "Christ of faith". When Niebuhr's Christology is understood in this way, it is hard to see that Christ, the cross, the incarnation or the resurrection are anything other than "symbolic" ways of appropriating the Christian faith into a rational if not, sceptical metaphysical schema. I do not want here to deny that there are certainly times when Niebuhr seems to fit this bill. However, it is an incomplete reading of both Niebuhr's early and later theologies to suggest that he is ultimately bound to that particular Christology. The fact of the matter is that Niebuhr's Christology demands a more careful reading than Hauerwas' pejorative use of the inverted commas around the word Christology affords.

<sup>41</sup> Edward John Carnell, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1951), p. 152.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, p. 154.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, p. 155.

“Christology is the leitmotiv of Reinhold Niebuhr’s theology”.<sup>44</sup> Lehmann makes this claim because he interprets the person of Christ as the fulcrum on which the “relevance” of the Christian gospel balances with the “truth” of that gospel in Niebuhr’s thought.<sup>45</sup> In other words, Lehmann sees Niebuhr’s Christ as *both* a moral exemplar *and* the incarnated son of God. There are three important characteristics of Niebuhr’s Christology, according to Lehmann: first “Christology is *pivotal*, not *peripheral*....Secondly, Niebuhr’s ideas about the person and work of Jesus Christ are rather more *implicit* than *explicit*....And thirdly, Niebuhr’s Christology is *reverse*, not *regular*”.<sup>46</sup> The first two points being self-evident, what Lehmann means by this third point is that though criticisms (like Carnell’s) that Niebuhr relies on the tradition of theological liberalism for his Christology are technically correct, they do not track Niebuhr’s thought far enough, because

as Niebuhr’s thought develops, he reverses the Christological orientation of theological liberalism. The theology of the nineteenth century abandoned the orthodox distinction between the person and the work of Christ as a scholastic construct and concentrated upon what in the tradition had been called ‘the work of Christ.’ It is the ‘Jesus of history’ rather than the ‘Christ of faith’ who is the object of theological investigation. Niebuhr, without surrendering the ‘Jesus of history,’ and without returning to a scholastic Christological scheme, nevertheless comes at the end to the view that Jesus’ relation to God is the basis of and the key to Jesus’ historical significance.<sup>47</sup>

In other words, Niebuhr’s developing Christology dissociates itself from one-sided theological liberalism in favour of a Christology which accords equal importance to both the person and work of Christ. Christ is “pivotal, not peripheral” in Niebuhr’s work, then, because Niebuhr’s Christology reflects his professional interests: it is a marriage of both theology and ethics.

One would thus, I think, be correct to suggest that Niebuhr’s Christology is reflective of theological liberalism on the one hand, while another who might point

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<sup>44</sup> Paul Lehmann, “The Christology of Reinhold Niebuhr”, in Kegley and Bretall (eds.), *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, pp. 252-280. See also Gabriel Fackre, “Was Reinhold Niebuhr a Christian?” in *First Things* 126 (October 2002): 25-27.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 253.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 255-256. Of course, part of the problem is that Niebuhr’s mature theology differs from the theology of his younger years, and Carnell was writing in a significant transitional period of Niebuhr’s professional career. Nevertheless, both volumes of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, which contain a



to the orthodox understanding of Christ in Niebuhr's thought would be equally correct on the other. Due to the length of Niebuhr's career and the breadth of his thought, the lack of consensus in the interpretations of, and associations with, even the "implicit" elements of Niebuhr's realism is to be expected.<sup>48</sup>

#### 6.5.1.2 *The Essential and Existential Christ*

Whatever the case may be, Lehmann is right to suggest that there is a dual-natured Christology in Niebuhr's thought which focuses on the "Christ of faith" and the "Christ of history". Niebuhr made this much clear in a 1954 piece for *The Saturday Review*. There—perhaps in response to Carnell's charge that Socrates and Jesus are indistinguishable in Niebuhr's thought—Niebuhr offers a comparison between Christ and Socrates. He concludes that though Christ and Socrates are united because of their status as "moral exemplars", what separates them is the issue of the "Christ of faith". "To assert that the Jesus of history is the Christ, and that 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself,' is an affirmation of faith which insists that the variance between man and God cannot be finally overcome by the virtue of man. All human virtue remains ambiguous to the end. It can be overcome only by a 'suffering' God who takes the sins of the world upon Himself".<sup>49</sup> Moreover, there is

a vast difference in seeing in Jesus an exemplar of the nobility of vicarious suffering, from regarding the whole drama of His life as the 'light that shines in the darkness' as a revelation of the mystery of

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significant amount of Niebuhr's later Christology, had been published before Carnell offered his criticisms.

<sup>48</sup> So Carnahan suggests that Niebuhr's Christology is similar to his theological adversary, Karl Barth. Writes Carnahan, "The core of...Barthian Christology [becomes] central in Niebuhr's own mature moral theology". See Carnahan, p. 58. Others, however, have found that association dubious. Mark Lovatt suggests that Niebuhr's Christology is borne out of his understanding of the human "will-to-power" and is linked to any salvific notions in Niebuhr's realism. On the other hand, Barth's dialectical theology interprets the salvation found in Christ as an "act of restoration, of completion, of overcoming the ontological impossibility of sin...brought about by Christ's work on the Cross in which the effects of sin were overcome and all humanity was redeemed in one event of salvation". Consequently, "Niebuhr's views concerning the nature of sin, the meaning of grace and the work of salvation were simply emptied of their meaning by Barth, who reduced the struggle against the will-to-power to a pointless activity". See Lovatt, *Confronting the Will-to-Power*, pp. 68, 70; 117-119. As we observed in chapter five, Niebuhr actually agrees that there is an "ontological impossibility" to sin. In that case, Niebuhr and Barth are probably closer than Lovatt allows, but they may not be so close as to be identical in their respective Christologies. Regardless, I think Carnahan is right to suggest that Niebuhr and Barth did agree, at least in some respects, on the issue of Christology. This will become more evident in the next chapter where the distinction between the "eschatos" and the "eschaton" in Niebuhr's theology is drawn.

<sup>49</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Christ vs. Socrates: A Remonstrance for Christmas" in *The Saturday Review* 37, no. 51(December 18, 1954): 37.

God's justice and mercy as it comes to terms with the perpetual rebellions of human ambitions against the divine will. To regard Him as this key which resolves mystery into meaning is to look at the whole drama of human existence without either obscuring the tragic factors in man's persistent egotism or in seeking vain methods of eliminating that egotism by mystical techniques of self-annulment....<sup>50</sup>

The point is that the distance between understanding Christ as a moral exemplar and asserting the most basic Christian doctrine that "Christ is Lord" is covered by a "leap of faith". To make this latter declaration is also to aver that the Christ of faith—God-in-Christ—is the one whose essentialness gives our existence meaning. The problem with declaring that Socrates (or any moral exemplar for that matter) is that the one who makes this declaration is ultimately mystified by her own existence. It is only God-in-Christ who can rescue humans from the despair of their own existential angst.

The 'existing' individual ceases to be an observer of the world and comes to terms with his own situation ultimately. This observation might persuade us to say a qualifying word about Socrates. He is supposed to be the fountain and source of all rational identifications of virtue and reason. But after all it was Socrates who said 'Know thyself.' By that much the view of Socrates and Christ share a common 'existentialism.'...Either the self engages in the abortive enterprise of regarding itself as ultimate (existentialism) or of losing itself, and annulling its contingent existence, in the ultimate (mysticism); or in finding itself in a dialogic relation with the divine. The revelation of Christ has meaning only in the context of such a dialogic relationship.<sup>51</sup>

In other words, those who understand Christ only in terms of the "Christ of history", or as moral exemplar, make the mistake of losing the key—which is the "Christ of faith"—to understanding the mystery of their lives as ultimately meaningful.

The importance of this for Niebuhr's realism is that it is Christ who holds Niebuhr's theology and ethics together. In this regard Lehmann is correct; Christ is the lynchpin for the theology of Niebuhr's early and later thought. The issues discussed in chapters two to five—Niebuhrian realism as moral realism, the

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, p. 38.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p. 39.

association of Niebuhr's thought with a version of post-Vatican II Catholic theology, the hermeneutics of Christian realism and the postmodern criticisms Niebuhr continues to receive—all explored, in some sense, the metaphysical nature of Niebuhr's articulation of Christian realism. Taken on their own, they each go some way toward clarifying what Niebuhr means when he speaks of Christian realism. But considered in light of the Christ of faith and the Christ of history, these various aspects of Christian realism can be understood together; they collectively relate to the Christ of faith or the Christ of history.

More importantly, though, the connection between Niebuhr's Christology and the more metaphysical elements of his ethics—that is, the connection between Niebuhr's theology and ethics—helps us to understand Christian realism as more than just a social, political or theological ethic. With Christ at the centre, we can interpret Christian realism as a type of *hopeful* social, political or theological ethic. But the ascription of theological hope to Niebuhr's articulation of Christian realism means something very particular. For Niebuhr, theological hope was always about the redemption of the essential and existential components that mark human life. We will explore that idea more fully in the next chapter. Before we can do that, though, there are some important ways Niebuhr conceives of Christ in regard to the hopeful elements of Christian realism which we need first to investigate. To affirm Lehmann's point, these are more implicit than explicit. We will look at these implicit ways that Niebuhr understands the person of Christ before returning to the question asked at the beginning of this chapter about whether or not theological hope can be ethical.

#### 6.8. *The Essential Christ*

Another way of speaking about the Christ of faith is to speak about the "essential" Christ. First, the essential Christ is the Christ who exists before all time because he is of the same substance (*homoousias*) of God and is, thus, the very essence of God. Second, however, the resurrected Christ's continued, present existence both *transcends* time and is ultimately related to us *in* time. In this sense, he is the Christ who is affirmed in the declarations of both the Nicene and Apostles' creeds that Christ "*is seated* at the right hand of the Father". Third, the essential Christ is the Christ who exists as the one who "*is to come*" (Rev. 1:8). In these three

characteristics of the essential Christ—the Christ who exists before, during and after all time—is the Christ who is “the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8). Because the dimensions of time, transcendent and imminent, are assimilated into the essence of Christ, it is only he who is capable of redeeming and reconciling the essential and existential elements of human life.

What is important about these three aspects of Christ’s existence is that they are the constituent parts of the metaphysical character of the Christ of faith. In his later work, Niebuhr affirms the redemptive relationship of the essential Christ to history, where he makes the distinction between transcendent (or “universal”) and imminent history. Universal history, Niebuhr tells us, “emerges by reason of the fact that the divine sovereignty which overarches all historical destiny is not the possession of any people or the extension of any particular historical power”.<sup>52</sup> The obverse of universal history is the idea “that history is filled with man’s proud and pretentious efforts to defy the divine sovereignty, to establish himself as god by his power or virtue, his wisdom or foresight”.<sup>53</sup> The tension established between these two understandings of history is only overcome, Niebuhr thinks, by God’s revelation in, and redemption of, history. In the Old Testament universal history is revealed to particular history in God’s self-revealing to Israel. This results in the paradox that “the special destiny of a nation exposes it to a special peril of pride and that capitulation to this temptation subjects Israel to a uniquely severe divine condemnation...”.<sup>54</sup> Israel’s predicament is special, but not unique; it is only a harbinger of the total human predicament made obvious by the ultimate revelation of universal in particular history: the revelation of God-in-Christ. That is, universal history was revealed in the essential Christ and humans have since that time succumbed to the “special peril of pride” to make their own particular history that of God’s universal history. Moreover, this conflict between universal history and particular history made clear in the establishment of the new covenant of Christ with humanity in the New Testament surpasses the same conflict established in the covenant of the Old Testament between Israel and Yahweh. While the covenant in the Old Testament is between a nation and God, the covenant in the New Testament

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<sup>52</sup> Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, p. 118.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.



is between all people and God. The new covenant is thus a universal covenant. Its universality, however, gives it its particularity. Thus, the covenant between humanity and the incarnated God-in-Christ is a particular covenant because all individuals experience the peril of pride and thus attempt to usurp the place of Christ as the meaning of all life. In the New Testament, then, Christ becomes central to resolving and redeeming the essential with existential elements of human life.

While Israel does have a central place in the drama of history, it has no special security...In the 'new covenant' or the 'New Testament' the triumph of Israel as the clue to the meaning of history is even more specifically denied. The revelation of Christ as the centre of, and clue to, history's meaning, is both the negation and the fulfilment of all partial meanings in history, as they are embodied in national, imperial, and even world-wide cultures.<sup>55</sup>

Christ's special purpose of redemption and his unique position at the centre of history's meaning is denotative of the fact that when we say that hope is not hope unless the things for which we hope are impossible, we mean that those things are impossibly hoped for *without* Christ. Niebuhr makes precisely this point when he says:

We must remember that all hopes and ideas conceived from within the temporal process of a system of meaning which transcends the temporal flux, are 'irrational'....The Christian hope is derived from the Christian revelation of the meaning in the divine mystery. That revelation is centred in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ....He is apprehended not only as a specific individual whose life has power beyond the grave, but as the key to the ultimate mystery of God and history.<sup>56</sup>

In other words, Christ, for Niebuhr, is the one in whom redemption between the essential and existential elements of human life occurs. We can thus further see that Milbank's charge from the last chapter that there are insurmountable obstacles for Niebuhr between the real and ideal of human life is mistaken because, to Niebuhr, the person of Christ not only *can*, but *does* overcome these tensions and is thus "not irrelevant to all our fragmentary meanings".

"A...word", Niebuhr continues,

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, p. 121.

<sup>56</sup> Niebuhr, *The Self and the Dramas of History*, pp. 254.

must be said about the intimate relation between the hope of the fulfilment of individual selfhood with the hope for the fulfilment of the whole historical drama. How incredible and how valid this combination of hopes is!...Its fulfilment is not possible without the fulfilment of the whole drama, yet the fulfilment of the total drama offers no adequate completion of meaning for the unique individual....The hope of the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting [redemption] is thus a fitting climax of the faith that there is a meaning to the story beyond our understanding of its meaning because it is grounded in power and purpose beyond our comprehension, though not irrelevant to all our fragmentary meanings.<sup>57</sup>

In other words, what we have here called impossible, or essential hope, Niebuhr calls irrational, or incredible, and what we have identified as possible, or existential hope, Niebuhr calls valid. Thus, the point made earlier stands: essential and existential hopes combine to give us our understanding of theological hope. The possibility of existential hopes (the “fulfilment of individual selfhood”) is fundamentally related to the impossibility of essential hopes (“the fulfilment of the whole historical drama”). What binds the two is the person of Christ, in whom “the hope of forgiveness of sins and life everlasting” is placed. More to the point, though, is that the role that the person of Christ (particularly the essential person of Christ) assumes in Niebuhr’s articulation of Christian realism begins to resemble the way that the objective properties of what was said could be called good, right or just in the earlier discussion of moral realism from chapter two. This connection between the Christ of faith and the guiding principle of moral realism is singularly the most important connection to draw when trying to understand how moral realism provides a basis for hope in Niebuhr’s articulation of Christian realism. For this reason, we will explore this idea more fully before bringing the discussion of essential hope and the Christ of faith to a close and turning our attention to the next chapter.

#### *6.8.1. The Christ of Faith as the Basis of Hope*

Christ is, for Niebuhr, the source of unlimited moral meaning for human existence. This is why we can say, in relation to essential and existential hopes, that it is the person of Christ whose essence gives human existence meaning. More

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 256-257.

precisely, though, it is the Christ of *faith*, the incarnated Christ, who gives moral meaning to human existence. Thus, it is the impertinent predication of hermeneutical realism in relation to Christ's incarnation that gives human existence its moral meaning. That is, the incarnation of Christ accords meaning to human existence "through the juxtaposition of logically and empirically distinct and even contradictory claims".<sup>58</sup> The logically and empirically distinct claims concerning the incarnation are, of course, that Christ was both fully human and fully divine. Moreover, it is the cruciform intersection of these two claims that come together to form the basis of our understanding of meaning in human existence. Niebuhr picks up on this theme from his earliest to most mature works and, though his elaboration of the theme changes over time, the meaning of it does not. For example, the early Niebuhr writes that "[i]f there is any lack of identity between the Jesus of history and the Christ of religious experience [or, 'faith'], the Jesus of history is nevertheless more capable of giving historical reality to the necessary Christ idea than any character of history".<sup>59</sup> In other words, Christ's essence (his divinity) is attested to by the historical existence of Christ (his humanity). Later in his most theological work to date, Niebuhr again affirms this idea and puts it in even starker terms with regard to Christ as the meaning of life, when he says that

[f]rom the perspective of human history, which cannot be fully comprehended from its own perspective or fulfilled by its own power, the *wisdom* and the *power* in Christ is what gives life is meaning and guarantees the fulfilment of that meaning....To say that Christ is the 'express image of his person' [Heb. 1:3] is to assert that in the epic of this life and death the final mystery of the divine power which bears history is clarified; and, with that clarification, life and history are given their true meaning.<sup>60</sup>

Both of these statements are realist statements because they each make claims to something objective and independent of human conceptions about it. In this case, it is the incarnation which is objective and independent from human conceptions (i.e., human history "which cannot be fully comprehended") about it. However, as already indicated in chapter five, though, independence from cognition

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<sup>58</sup> Chapter four, n. 20.

<sup>59</sup> Niebuhr, *Does Civilization Need Religion?*, p. 236.

<sup>60</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. II, p. 55.

is not indicative of irrelevance in relation to human existence. Indeed, reality's objectivity is of supreme importance.

In addition to being the source of unlimited meaning, Christ is also the basis of hope for Niebuhr. Hope stands apart from human cognition in the same way that Christ does. We will see how momentarily, but first let us explore two ways in which Christ is representative for Niebuhr of the kind of independent objectivity discussed in the earlier chapters of part one. These include "Christ, the impossible" and "Christ, the form of moral goodness".

#### *6.9. Christ, the Impossible: Postliberalism and Christian Realism*

Niebuhr's assertion that "there is a meaning to the story beyond our understanding of its meaning" is, again, a realist statement. History (the "story"), for Niebuhr, provides the framework within which the Christ of faith imparts meaning, and out of which the act of human self-transcendence occurs. But history is that which humans can know, that which does not stand independently of human cognition. It is the meaning of history's story which stands apart from human understanding of it, though it is still knowable.

It should be noted that though Niebuhr speaks of history as a story, his account of Christian realism is different from recent narrative theologies like "postliberalism". Postliberalism identifies God with the story of history, which is told and interpreted particularly. That is, the "narrative" of history is usually related to biblical texts, which are read and interpreted by particular people in particular contexts at particular times. As George Lindbeck puts it:

The normative or literal meaning [of a text] must be consistent with the kind of text it is taken to be by the community for which it is important. The meaning must not be esoteric: not something behind, beneath, or in front of the text; not something that the text reveals, discloses implies, or suggests to those with extraneous metaphysical, historical, or experiential interests. It must rather be what the text says in terms of the communal language of which the text is an instantiation....An intratextual reading tries to derive the interpretive framework that designates the theologically controlling sense from the literary structure of the text itself.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, (London: SPCK, 1984), p. 120.



In other words, the meanings of texts must be decided by those who are interpreting the texts in particular circumstances. Christian realism differs from postliberalism in this way: on the one hand, postliberalism emphasises the narrative telling of the text which fluctuates within different contexts. The realist, on the other hand, thinks of the meaning behind the story as that which gives coherence to the story and to the contexts in which the story is told. In the case of Christian realism, it is God who is the meaning behind the story of history, and who is interactive with history, but who also operates independently of history.<sup>62</sup> In Christian realism, then, there is no loss of metanarratives; or, of a meaning behind the story which guides the story along.<sup>63</sup>

Why is this important for a discussion about hope in Niebuhrian realism? Because it emphasises the elements that are important to understanding essential and existential hopes. The meaning behind the story—God, for the Christian realist—is the one in whom the realist places the impossibility of his or her essential hopes. But in the story itself—history—the realist can hope existentially for the things which are not impossible; that is why we say that they are *historically* realisable.

More to the point, though, postliberalism actually highlights some of the important elements of Christian realism discussed previously. The issues raised by postliberalism with regard to narrative readings and casuist interpretations of human contexts are redolent of the kind of ethic Niebuhr himself advocated, particularly as we observed when it came to the similarities between Christian realism and post-Vatican II existentialism.

Additionally, Niebuhr actually *does* interpret history narratively, with “dramatic patterns”, such as a classic story with plotlines, conflicts, denouements

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<sup>62</sup> Cf. Niebuhr, “History (God) Has Overtaken Us”, in *Love and Justice*, p. 293 where Niebuhr declares that God has acted independently of human decisions about whether or not to enter World War II, and has taken “the decision out of our hands”.

<sup>63</sup> There are, however, still parallels between Niebuhrian realism and narrative theology. See, for example, *Christian Realism and the New Realities* in which Lovin identifies Christian realism with another kind of “realism” which he calls the position of “The Witness”. The Witness, identified most easily with Hauerwas’s ecclesio-centric ethic, demonstrates its postliberal roots with its insistence that “the truths of Christian faith must be held in a community formed by a shared narrative, which shapes individual character and makes shared moral judgments possible”. Lovin’s argument is that the position of the Witness is not a reduplication of Christian realism, but can be closely identified with realism because the Witness “is so clearly shaped by its explicit rejection of the Christian realist understanding of faith and politics”. *Christian Realism and the New Realities*, pp. 24, 21 respectively.

and a resolution.<sup>64</sup> Such an interpretation is why we can speak of the pain of the past associated with the celebration of the resurrection and the Eucharist. Those celebrations and memories would not be partially painful if they were not part of a larger story. It is precisely because they are the elements that constitute a larger story which has been lived and continues to be experienced that they can evoke such emotion and that they have any meaning for us. Francesca Murphy is a realist who makes this same point in her critique of narrative theology when she says that

[n]ot only [do] narrative theologies...not succeed on their own terms, but...what they propose can feasibly be achieved without making God a story....An analogy is not just a vague *reminder*...but an actual *recollection*....Analogies are cathartic, they are used at once affirmatively and negatively....An experience is called cathartic when it is so awful that it is purifying. Such an experience puts us through the *reality* of the experience it names or recollects so vividly that it takes it out of us, *by binding us to it*....The cathartic aspect of analogy is its purging us of our ordinary perspective, showing us what the world looks like upside-down, to us; for then we see, not only realities, but the perfect *source* of realities.<sup>65</sup>

In other words, when we attempt to remember the past, we do so analogically, which is just another way of saying that because we cannot recreate what once was, the best we can do is relate our experiences to something that is representative of our past. Murphy takes this one step further—and thus makes the realistic point I have been stressing—by saying that remembering our past experiences analogically is painful, but it is also a remembrance that points us to the essence of God-in-Christ.

So, if we take the Eucharist analogically (and thus, with Murphy, cathartically) we understand that its significance is that it binds us to the reality of the experience of Christ's sacrifice by its awful, yet purifying effect on us. We are thus bound to Christ himself, the "perfect source of realities". It is here where the loss of the meaning behind the story is so dangerous because that loss results in the ultimate loss of a basis for hope. Interpreting Christ as the meaning behind the story is only one part of the approach that arrives at the basis for theological hope in its

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<sup>64</sup> Cf., Niebuhr, "The Self and the Dramas of History" in *The Self and the Dramas of History*, pp. 56-64.

<sup>65</sup> Francesca Aran Murphy, *God is Not a Story: Realism Revisited*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 315-316.

essential and existential forms. As argued in chapter four, there are both “how” and “what” components to consider in hermeneutics. If the interpretation of Christ as the meaning behind the story answers *what* we are interpreting as the basis for theological hope, then it remains for us to answer *how* we go about interpreting Christ in this way.

#### 6.10. Christ, the “Form” of Reality

As already indicated in chapter five, imagination plays a significant role in the realist’s social hermeneutic. There, following Lovibond’s lead, we noted that the imagination for the realist is related to an epistemic function that seeks to know and interpret the present social realities in which the moral agent finds himself or herself.<sup>66</sup> Rather than being the result of a prescribed feature of human nature (Stoicism), the imagination, for the realist, serves a discursive function: it begins by assessing social realities, thinks “practically” about them and then tries to imagine ways in which those realities can, if needed, be appropriately changed, all the while acknowledging that a *creatio ex nihilo* is not a possibility. That is, whatever “new” social realities the realist imagines will not be altogether dissimilar from the realities that were interpreted in the first place. Imagination, then, causes the realist to “go out” from himself or herself (recall Niebuhr’s emphasis on self-transcendence) in order better to know the independent, objective *facts* of social realities. Moreover, in this capacity to transcend the self imaginatively the moral agent is also met by the objective realities that he or she seeks to know. “The imagination is both creative and receptive”.<sup>67</sup> It “creates” new ways of interpreting realities, but those interpretations are based on the information about the realities that the one who is imagining has *received* from the realities. In the case of Christian realism, the reality which meets the moral agent is the reality of God, whose transcendence is manifest in the incarnation of Christ. In the incarnation “God speaks to man”, and in the act of self-transcendence which meets the incarnated God, the moral agent knows that “[m]an is most free in the discovery that he is not free”.<sup>68</sup> The imagination, then, plays a significant role for the Christian realist in terms of understanding the reality of God.

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<sup>66</sup> See chapter five, pp.

<sup>67</sup> Francesca Aran Murphy, *Christ, the Form of Beauty: A Study in Theology and Literature*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p. 7.

Murphy has an important word to say on the way the imagination fosters the critical ability to interpret the incarnated Christ of faith. She offers a realist interpretation of this incarnation which is important because it emphasises the independent, objective nature of Christ as an archetype, or “form”. The imagination for the realist, according to Murphy, is

unlike fantasy in that it is of or about something. Imagining is a way of being related to facts. It is a means of knowing facts through images. Such images are inbuilt perspectives on reality. Experience is filtered through images. The type of world which we experience is determined by their frame. We need those images which focus upon the full density of facts. Our ways of imagining should allow us to enter the world as concrete, and individual....To experience the world through narrow images is to be directed to particular facts. Imagination thus turns facts into humanly apprehensible forms....Images give shape to the relation between the self and the world.<sup>69</sup>

In other words, images foster imaginative exploration. Realistic images—artistic depictions, photographs, film, literary constructs, et al.—give us depictions of things that are real, but that exist independently of what we think of them. For example, when I read Augustine’s account of stealing pears, I do not have to live in fourth century Tagaste to understand the emotions of avarice and shame and to know that they are real. What this means for the relationship of the Christian realist’s imagination to the incarnation of Christ is that the person of Christ as the representation of God, the Christ of faith, is apprehended by the receptive imagination as the representation of God. Murphy suggests that this apprehension occurs with a “realistic metaphysic” in place and after we attempt to “say how the self is real”.<sup>70</sup> That is, as discussed in chapters two and four, respectively, once we understand that there are objective realities, we can understand ourselves existentially. From the acknowledgement of objective realities (essentiality) and the effort to understand ourselves in light of those realities (existentiality) is borne the “need to see how the imaginative grasp of form is met by One Who comes to meet it from beyond human powers of exploration. The ultimate goal of the imagination’s search for meaning lies in the singular form of a supernatural Person”.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. I, pp. 147, 260 respectively.

<sup>69</sup> Murphy, *Christ, the Form of Beauty*, p. 7.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, p. 13.



This makes the point being stressed; namely that this “Person”, the Christ of faith, assumes the role of objective reality posited by Christian realism. As such, he is the essential “form” of God, who has relevance to human existence. As Niebuhr writes:

The God of the Christian faith is the creator of the world. His wisdom is the principle **form**, the *logos*. But creation is not merely the subjection of a primitive chaos to the **order** of *logos*. God is the **source** of vitality as well as of order. Order and vitality are a unity in Him. Even the *logos*, identified with the second person of the Trinity in Christian faith, is more than *logos*. The Christ is the redeemer who reveals God in His redemptive vitality, above and beyond the revelation of the created order...He is the **pattern**, the *logos* of creation. But he is also the revelation of the redemptive will which restores a fallen world to the pattern of its creation.<sup>72</sup>

In other words, it is the Christ of faith in whom objective reality is made manifest to us. Murphy suggests, and Niebuhr agrees, that the Christ of faith is understood in mythological terms. We will take a moment to explore what this means, before coming to the conclusion of this chapter.

#### 6.11. “The Truth in Myths”

To this point, I have deliberately not discussed Niebuhr’s use of myth for two reasons. First, the role of myth in Christian realism has been the source of not a modest amount of attention and it has not been in my interest here to recapitulate any commentaries on the topic. Second, Niebuhr’s use of myth has not been relevant to our discussion of his realism until now.

Niebuhr understands myth as that which bridges the gap between objective reality and human existence because of its ability to express those “aspects of reality which are suprascientific”.<sup>73</sup> Myth, in other words, speaks to those things which cannot be explained by empirical investigations, but are nevertheless true. Thus, myth is the language of imagination because it is “the sole linguistic mode adequate for the elucidation of meaning in history”.<sup>74</sup> If, as stated, Christ is the meaning of history, then it follows that Niebuhr would identify the incarnation as mythological because “myth points to the relation between the self-transcending human reality and a divine, or exemplary world....The myth dramatizes the reciprocity between human

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<sup>72</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. I, p. 28. Boldfaced words mine.

<sup>73</sup> Niebuhr, “The Truth in Myths”, p. 16.

<sup>74</sup> Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, p. 46.

openness toward the supernatural and the divine itself'.<sup>75</sup> If the realist imagination enables both the transcendence of the self-in-existence and the reception of essential facts about external realities, then myth is the result of the meeting of these two things which, for the Christian realist, occurs in the essence of God-in-Christ.

Niebuhr characterises the incarnation as mythical because this approach captures that which cannot be understood rationally. "We are deceivers, yet true, [2. Cor. 6:8]" Niebuhr writes, "when we affirm that God became man to redeem the world from sin....[I]t is impossible to assert that the eternal ground of existence has entered existence and not sacrificed its eternal and unconditioned quality, without outraging every canon of reason".<sup>76</sup> To characterise the incarnation as mythical, however, does not mean that the incarnation is therefore false. "The truth that the Word was made flesh outrages all the canons by which truth is usually judged. Yet it is the truth. The whole character of the Christian religion is involved in that affirmation".<sup>77</sup> The only way to preserve the truth in myths is to avoid attempts that try to explain how a myth could literally be true. As one review noted about Niebuhr's understanding of myth, "every myth becomes falsehood the moment we treat it as exact scientific statement".<sup>78</sup> When the myth of the incarnation becomes a falsehood, theology becomes absurd because it attempts "to define the two natures of Christ and to distinguish between the temporal and the eternal in the mythical God-man, [and to] prove how impossible it is to bring essential myth into the categories of rationality".<sup>79</sup>

Thus, what myth gives the Christian realist is a way of expressing what imagination can envision, but not articulate. For Niebuhr, "the Christ of Christian faith is both human and divine. His actions represent both human possibilities and the limits of human possibilities".<sup>80</sup> When imagination leads the realist to the conclusion that she is not as free as once thought, it is the reality, or "form", of Christ with whom she is confronted. In this sense, Christ is "[t]he transcendent

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<sup>75</sup> Murphy, *Christ, the Form of Beauty*, p. 15.

<sup>76</sup> Niebuhr, "As Deceivers, Yet True" in *Beyond Tragedy*, p. 13.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, p. 14.

<sup>78</sup> W. Watcyn-Williams, *British Weekly* (July 21, 1938), n.p. Cited in Halliwell, *The Constant Dialogue*, p. 170. Halliwell notes on the same page that by the time Niebuhr wrote "The Truth in Myths" he "had become increasingly interested in myths as partly constitutive of reality...".

<sup>79</sup> Niebuhr, "The Truth in Myths", p. 26.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, p. 31.

source of the meaning of life [and] is thus in such relation to all temporal process that a profound insight into any process or reality yields a glimpse of the reality which is beyond it".<sup>81</sup> What provides the "glimpse" in the case of Christ as the transcendent source of life's meaning is the incarnation; that is, the person of God-in-Christ presents a vision of who God is and how God relates to human existence. "Thus a man becomes the symbol of God and the religious sense that the absolute invades the relative and the historical is adequately expressed".<sup>82</sup>

It is precisely in this relation of Christ to human existence that we find the basis for both essential and existential hopes. Before turning to our final chapter, let us take a moment to explore how the Christ of faith provides this basis for hope.

#### *6.12. From Christ to Hope*

The consistent theme in the previous chapters has been that reality for the moral realist is that which is independently good, right or just. It is also the impetus for the realist's moral action. In this chapter, we have observed how, in Niebuhr's understanding of realism, it is the Christ of faith who occupies the place of the moral realist's reality. Rather than a generalised moral principle, it is the particularity of God-in-Christ, from whom we understand what goodness, rightness and justness are about. Furthermore, we have observed how the Christ of faith is the basis of hope and the one in whom essential and existential hopes are founded.

These statements amount to the following syllogism for Christian realists in the Niebuhrian tradition: The Christ of faith is the impetus for us to act morally. All of our hopes are ultimately reconciled in Christ. The ability to act morally therefore springs from the hope that is Christ. Niebuhr summarised this succinctly by claiming that "the Christ in us is not a possession but a hope".<sup>83</sup> That is, though Christ exists separately from how we conceive of him, he is the basis of our hope in our moral acts because we know "that perfection is not a reality but an intention; that such peace as we know in this life is never purely the peace of achievement but the serenity of being 'completely known and all forgiven'; [and that] all this does not destroy moral ardour or responsibility".<sup>84</sup> When we understand Christ in these terms, we understand that "[t]he meaningfulness of life does not tempt to premature

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Niebuhr, *Reflections on the End of an Era*, p. 287.

<sup>83</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. II, p. 125.

complacency, and the chaos which always threatens the world of meaning does not destroy the tension of faith and hope in which all moral action is grounded".<sup>85</sup>

It is thus appropriate to suggest, Niebuhr's abjurations notwithstanding, that theology inhabits not only *a* place, but *the* place of highest importance for the ethics of Niebuhr's realism. From theology flows his understanding of ethics; from the person of Christ, the basis of hope.

This is not, of course, how Niebuhr has always been interpreted. During and since the time of his career, there have been a considerable number of writings about the ethics of Christian realism, particularly its political ethics, but very few on the theology of Christian realism, due in large part to the perception (summarised by James Gustafson) that, for Niebuhr, "theology was in the service of ethics".<sup>86</sup> Gustafson offers four "base points" to suggest Niebuhr prioritises ethics over theology. "First, theological ethics, like other ethics, has to account for the procedures used to come to a practical moral or social choice....If one [compares] an ethic of conscience and an ethic of cultural or social responsibility, it is clear that Niebuhr's work fits the latter type".<sup>87</sup> From this putative emphasis on social responsibility comes Gustafson's second point, what he identifies as "the interpretation of circumstances".<sup>88</sup> Niebuhr, according to Gustafson, interprets social realities in light of his theological beliefs (understood mythically) so that "[t]he importance of the Kingdom of God coming at the end of history is that the belief assures hope, and thus Christianity does not lead to a finally tragic view of life".<sup>89</sup> But this does not mean that Niebuhr gives priority to theology. It only means that theology gives reason to avoid despair, but that it is still deferential to ethics. In other words, Gustafson sees Niebuhr viewing hope only as the carrot at the end of the stick, not as a component of his overall theologio-ethical project. Thirdly, Gustafson points to anthropological emphases in Christian realism.<sup>90</sup> Gustafson points to the stress on experience in Niebuhr's thought as evidence that Niebuhr

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 106.

<sup>86</sup> James Gustafson, "Theology in the Service of Ethics" in *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of Our Times*, (London: Mowbray, 1986). p. 44.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.



gives precedence to ethics. Human experiences are “most accurately understood” when they are analysed “biblically” for Niebuhr, but “[t]he test of the correct analysis is its efficacy in leading to appropriate kinds of moral and political actions”.<sup>91</sup> Therefore, it need not necessarily be the bible that analyses human experience most accurately, just whatever is most efficacious. It is only after these three points that Niebuhr, for Gustafson, arrives at the fourth point: the doctrine of God.

For Niebuhr...the transcendence of God was finally accented more than the immanence...[which] provided a basis for grasping the relativities of historical experience....What he says about God and God’s relations to the world establish the conditions of possibility for proper moral and political life: a principle of judgement in the light of which all human activities are seen as finite and sinful; a principle of mercy which enables human agents to be free to act prudentially; and a *principle of hope* which militates against ultimate meaninglessness and despair.<sup>92</sup>

In other words, Gustafson, not unlike Milbank in the last chapter, makes these points to suggest that theology for Niebuhr is really just a gloss which attempts to avoid an otherwise hopeless ethic, but that if something proved to be more efficient at this than Christian theology, it would be just as “serviceable” for moral enquiry.

Of course, Gustafson (like Milbank) is not entirely incorrect in his summation of Christian realism. Some of the areas Gustafson underscores I, too, have emphasised as important for understanding Niebuhr. But what I have also tried to do, particularly in this chapter, is to demonstrate that one can begin with a general moral philosophical enquiry like moral realism and see how it correlates to Christian realism. However, one cannot end with those comparisons because they inevitably lead to four conclusions. First, the particularity of Christ replaces the more generalised account of moral objectivity in Christian realism. Second, Christ, like the generalised accounts of moral objectivity is thus both transcendent *and* immanent in Christian realism. Third, Christ is the one in whom the Christian realist’s hopes are placed and, even when those (essential) hopes are said to be “impossible”, they are only impossible without the immanence of Christ. And

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<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, p. 41.

fourth, hope, then, is not a gloss, but a *reality* in the full sense of the word as it has been used here throughout.

### 6.13. Conclusions

In this chapter we have looked at several different facets of what it means for the realist to say that hope is not hope unless the thing for which we hope is impossible. We compared what I have called essential and existential hopes and concluded that though essential hopes are “impossible” as far as they go, they become the impossible *possibility* when related to the Christ of faith. That is, it is the incarnated Christ, both human and God, in whom impossible, essential hopes become realities.

The utopian hopes of Rauschenbusch were also considered and it was determined that Niebuhr and Rauschenbusch would have been much closer on the issue of what can legitimately be hoped for if Rauschenbusch had not confused the difference between essential and existential hopes, or the difference between natural and unnatural life. The example of the Eucharist is instructive here because it illustrates the difference between sentimentality which knows not what it hopes for and nostalgia which hopes for those things that can only be made complete in Christ.

Following this was an excursus on the 1954 WCC meeting to demonstrate Niebuhr's hesitancy in speaking about certain kinds of hope. Hope associated with a too-literal eschatology is problematic for Niebuhr precisely because it relies on a depiction of God that is transcendent, not immanent to human life.

Nevertheless, the inclusion of Christ in the WCC theme was important and led to our discussion of Christology in Niebuhr's thought. We investigated Niebuhr's understanding of Christ's paradoxical nature, as well as the essential and existential components of Niebuhr's Christology which, with Lehmann, we recognised as central to Niebuhr's realism.

From the Christological emphasis emerged a depiction of Christ as the “form” of moral goodness, which replaces the more generalised account of objectivity in realism. It is here that Niebuhr's realism becomes specifically *Christian* realism. Additionally, Christ as the objective reality of Christian realism provides the basis for theological hopes in their essential and existential forms. It is

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 43-44. Italics mine.

Christ's immanence, his omnipresence in human existence that makes his basis of hope possible. Without this, all hopes—essential or existential—would be impossible impossibilities. But because transcendence becomes immanence in Christ, we have impossible possibilities.

As we now move into the next chapter we will spend more time on what I have called existential, or immanent hopes. Immanent hopes, we will see, are related to Niebuhr's understanding of eschatology, which is very much unlike the eschatology of the WCC that Niebuhr criticised. What differentiates the two is "ontological eschatology" which leads to "redemptive hope" for Christian realism, as we will see. Let us begin the ending now.

## Chapter Seven

### IMMANENT HOPE

“Reinhold Niebuhr...treated hope almost as an anesthetic, like a scotch at the end of a hard day of work”.<sup>1</sup>

#### *7.1 Abstract*

Immanent hope is the hope for those things which are realisable in history. Having discussed transcendent hope in the previous chapter, in this chapter we will explore immanent hope in Christian realism. This discussion will be related to Niebuhr's understanding of eschatology, and several areas of exploration will be necessary for consideration. These include: the eschaton and the Eschatos; a comparison with Barth on the issue of eschatology; an account of what Charles Matthewes has called “ontological eschatology” and how it relates to Niebuhr's realism; an Augustinian appraisal of the proper orientation of love; and the location of repentance and redemption in Niebuhr's thought. As with earlier chapters, the discussion in this chapter will remain related to the realism that we have identified with Christian realism.

#### *7.2 Introduction*

For Niebuhr, hope is, like the Christ of faith, both transcendent and immanent.<sup>2</sup> There are those kinds of hope that Niebuhr identifies as “catastrophic”, or what I have called essential, which are attached to those things that are impossible. These are transcendent hopes; hopes which transcend our ability to fulfil them, and which are identified with Christ. There are also the kinds of “everyday” hope, or what I have called existential hopes, which hope for the types of things which are not impossible (e.g., “Because I hope to deliver a good lecture on Tuesday, I must be well-prepared”). These are immanent hopes; hopes for which we bear some responsibility in order to see them become realities. Chapter six was spent discussing what it means to say that hope is not hope unless the things for which we hope are impossible. That was the beginning of the transition from the moral philosophical elements of Christian realism that occupied part one of the thesis to the theological concerns of part two.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Matthewes, *A Theology of Public Life*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 239.



In this final chapter, we will continue with the theological concerns begun previously, but now turn our attention to a more dynamic account of existential hopes and their relationship to Niebuhr's Christian realism. Several areas of interest need covering in order to accomplish this task. We will first take a look at some of the eschatological concerns of Christian realism. I have intentionally (and appropriately) saved eschatology for last, not because it plays a small role in Niebuhr's theology—though, to be sure, when he does speak of eschatology, he tends to do so critically—but because the emphasis Niebuhr gives to moral concerns ushers in a different understanding of eschatology than one might expect.

Here we will first discuss eschatology and the Eschatos (Christ) and the importance of the differences between the two for Niebuhr's realism. This will be useful for understanding the horizontal and vertical dimensions of transcendence in Niebuhr's thought, which will lead into a comparison with Barth—a useful, if unlikely interlocutor—on the issue of eschatology. Second, we will explore Charles Matthewes's account of eschatology and how it provides important corollaries with Niebuhrian realism, especially with regard to Augustine's notion of the need for a properly-oriented love. Third, the notion of futurity in Niebuhr's eschatology will be considered, particularly with regard to Niebuhr's criticisms of utopian liberalism. Here it will be useful to take into account some expressions of liberation theology on the issue of eschatology. Fourth and finally, two sections on redemption and repentance will bring the chapter to a close. It will be demonstrated that Niebuhr thought of redemption as the place where essential and existential hopes are reconciled in the person of Christ. Before we can get there, though, we need to make our way through the other sections first. Let us do that now.

### *7.3. Beginning With the End; or, Ending With the Beginning*

The essential Christ stands in distinction to the existential Christ, but the two are still related. As Niebuhr notes, “[t]he idea that Christ is the ‘essential’ man, the perfect norm of human character” means that God-in-Christ (the “Christ of faith”) offers the basis for the assertion that life “*can approach its original innocence only*

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Keith Ward's short, but helpful essay on Niebuhr's eschatology as it relates transcendentally and immanently to his political theology. Keith Ward, “Reinhold Niebuhr and the Christian Hope” in

by aspiring to its unlimited end".<sup>3</sup> That is to say that because the transcendent Christ is also the (perfect) immanent Christ, sinful life can regain its lost perfection by "aspiring" to the perfection of immanent Christ, who is the "ultimate end" of life. Whereas the essential Christ is the Christ of faith, the existential Christ is the Christ of history. The essential Christ is also the theological realist's Christ who, as noted in the last chapter, stands objectively apart from our conceptions of him. On the contrary, the existential Christ exists in (but not solely in) human conceptions of him—narratively and historically constructed, and described in scripture. This is not to posit a dualism between the natures of Christ, but to offer an account of the different ways we have of conceiving Christ's existence in order that we might better understand how the person of Christ relates to the account of hope that is in the Christian (1 Pet. 3:15).

In chapter six the essential Christ, the Christ of faith, was related to the essential hopes associated with those things deemed impossible. The counterpoint to this, of course, is that the existential Christ is associated with the kinds of hopes that are not impossible because the status of our existential hopes as capable of being fulfilled is associated with the historical Christ. The historical Christ is God-in-Christ who no longer stands apart from human cognition. Neither, then, are the hopes placed in the historical Christ any longer impossible. What is important about God's transcendence of objective reality into historical existence is that it occurs in the meeting of eternity with time. In this sense the existential Christ meets historical existence *eschatologically*. That is, the Christ of history comes to human existence as the one in whom all redemption of historical contingencies has occurred and the one in whom they will occur; in a "realised" eschatology of sorts. This will be discussed more fully momentarily, but first it is important to discuss what eschatology means for Niebuhr.

### 7.3.1. Niebuhr and Eschatology

In chapter six, it was demonstrated that Niebuhr was strongly opposed to the selection of the theme, "Christ, the hope of the world" for the 1954 meeting of the World Council of Churches because of the attendant fevered interest in eschatology he feared it could encourage. The choice of this theme, in Niebuhr's opinion,

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*Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of Our Time*, pp. 61-87.

focused too much on knowing “the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell”, a danger Niebuhr was always quick to criticise.<sup>4</sup> The opposite position to this emphasis was preoccupation with the immanence of Christ to the exclusion of Christ’s transcendence, a move for which Niebuhr found Rauschenbusch’s social gospel guilty.

In the only book-length treatment to date on the theme of hope in Christian realism, Robert Cornelison argues that Niebuhr, “in response to [Rauschenbusch’s] immanentism, counterposes an understanding of the vertical [transcendent] relationship of God and world, while down-playing the horizontal [immanent] elements of that relationship”.<sup>5</sup> In place of the stress on things such as human progressiveness that was associated with liberalism from the early twentieth century, Cornelison suggests that “Niebuhr emphasizes the ‘otherness’ and aseity of God. God remains *deus absconditus* even in God’s own revelation. God’s freedom over and against his creatures is absolute and final. God is thus related to his creatures in a vertical sense, as a king is to his subjects”.<sup>6</sup> The notion of God’s aseity—a theme understandably integrated into Niebuhr’s realism, given its foundations in neo-orthodoxy—leads Cornelison to the conclusion that, with Niebuhr, “one gets the sense that creation is a realm of immanent causal connections between historical events with little room for intervention from supernatural sources”.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, “[i]n such a view, the meaning of the world is continuous with God, but the eternal is phenomenologically discontinuous with the temporal”.<sup>8</sup> In other words, and in contrast to the theology of Rauschenbusch, the dimension of Niebuhr’s vertical, transcendent theology prevails over any horizontal, immanent dimensions.

Cornelison is accurate to note the positioning of “verticality” in Niebuhr’s realism, but it remains to be seen that the importance Niebuhr accords to the complete otherness of God results in the obliteration of continuity between God and the world. In this sense, Cornelison goes too far with the vertical dimensions of

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<sup>3</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. II, pp. 76-77.

<sup>4</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. II, p. 294.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Thomas Cornelison, *The Christian Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr and the Political Theology of Jürgen Moltmann in Dialogue: The Realism of Hope*, (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992), p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

Niebuhr's thought and not far enough with the horizontal dimensions because, as we have stressed in these last two chapters, Niebuhr incorporates *both* horizontal (immanent) and vertical (transcendent) elements in his Christology. Langdon Gilkey, who has written on the issues of vertical transcendence and horizontal immanence in Niebuhr's realism, affirms Cornelison's point about supernaturalism when he notes that in "[N]iebuhr's thought both [divine activity and human freedom] were effective in historical changes...[but] for him only *finite* (secondary) *causes*...effect these changes; hence historical developments are the result of *historical* causes alone....No supernatural interventions into the scheme of finite occurrences are to be expected".<sup>9</sup> However, Gilkey goes beyond Cornelison's conclusion when he adds that, "When God works in history—and for Niebuhr God does so work—it is *through* these finite causes".<sup>10</sup> On the one hand, according to Gilkey, Cornelison is correct that Niebuhr does not ever anticipate a supernatural intervention to transcend space-time causality in the sense that God breaks aseity and acts on behalf of those who are themselves responsible to act in the first place. Such an intervention would invalidate the freedom of both God and the individual because God's intervention would mean that God were bound to natural causation while at the same time obviating any need for human responsibility. On the other hand, though, Cornelison misses the point that God's immanence in history is found in the "secondary" causes of human interaction and natural causation. Here Cornelison completes the wholesale exchange of transcendence for immanence in Niebuhr's thought. What results is a picture of Christ who stands only independently of human existence, rather than Christ who is "there among" those who gather in his name.

Cornelison does, however, give attention to an area where Gilkey's analysis of Niebuhr is weakest. Though he focuses too little on immanence, Cornelison recognises that, for Niebuhr, when confronted with the fact of God's vertical transcendence, the result is faith which "causes a person to recognize his or her inability to find complete fulfillment in the created world. It breaks the vicious cycle of self-centeredness by revealing the source of fulfillment to be outside of the self".<sup>11</sup> Moreover, it is in the acceptance of this faith that "the person's purpose and intention

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<sup>9</sup> Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, p. 236.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* Underlined words mine; italics Gilkey's.



are in the direction of Christ as norm [i.e., theological realism]”.<sup>12</sup> Gilkey, on the other hand, does not go far enough here because the point of God’s immanence for Niebuhr is not only that there is a divine causality in finite human acts, but also that the specificity of God’s act in history occurs in both the Christ of history and the Christ of faith. Overemphasis on either the vertical or horizontal nature of God’s involvement in history finally leads to a hopeless ethic because the essential and existential elements are left unreconciled. Niebuhr makes this point when he notes that

[i]f...the New Testament faith ends in the pinnacle of the hope of the resurrection [i.e., with the essential Christ of faith] that is also the final expression of a faith which sees no hope that man may overcome or escape the contingent character of his existence; yet is not without hope, for it is persuaded that a divine power and love has been disclosed in Christ [i.e., the existential Christ of history], which will complete what man cannot complete; and which will overcome the evil introduced into human life and history by man’s abortive effort to complete his life by his own wisdom and power.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, it is only the crucified *and* resurrected Christ who completes the reconciliation of our imperfect existence with God’s essential nature. Another way of saying this is that we finally begin to understand the nature of God’s objective reality through Christ. But this reconciliation only occurs through Christ at a time that is not ours and *not yet*. At the same time, this sense of futurity does not lessen our present impetus to act morally. “[E]ven the most superficial estimate of this ‘vertical’ dimension of experience suggests that the more ‘horizontal’ dimension is implicit in every moment of experience. Every action is bound both to its origins [in God] and to its consequences [in history]....The completion of an act and a responsibility always lies in an historical to-morrow and not merely in the eternal”.<sup>14</sup> Niebuhr, then, posits an eschatology which sees the reconciliation of all essential and existential elements of life taking place in Christ.

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<sup>11</sup> Cornelison, *The Christian Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr and the Political Theology of Jürgen Moltmann in Dialogue*, p. 43.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, p. 170.

<sup>14</sup> Niebuhr, *Discerning the Signs of the Times*, p. 93.

Regardless of his overemphasis on vertical transcendence, Cornelison's interpretation is helpful because it unknowingly highlights an important link between Niebuhr and Barth. Recall that in the last chapter we mentioned the associations between Niebuhr and Barth on the issue of Christology. There I suggested that though the two do not presume identical Christologies, they are at least similar when it comes to the issue of who Christ is in relation to eschatology.

This is not just a point of triviality. Rather, it is important because it demonstrates the influence on Niebuhr of a thinker widely hailed as indispensable to twentieth century theology. Moreover, it illustrates that the chasm Niebuhr detects with European theologians generally and Barth, particularly, on the issue of eschatology may not be as great as Niebuhr believed. Because Barth's dialecticism is representative of the kind of emphasis on vertical transcendence Cornelison finds in Niebuhr, it is worth investigating what issues Niebuhr and Barth find in common.

#### *7.4. Niebuhr and Barth on Eschatology*

For Barth, Christ does not necessarily inhabit the same role of objective reality that he does for Niebuhr. As John McDowell has noted about Richard Roberts's interpretation of Barth's Christology, "Barth [for Roberts]...derives his view of 'reality' from neither metaphysics nor...the social sciences".<sup>15</sup> Instead, "[Barth] develops [his view of reality] from God's Self-positing in Christ".<sup>16</sup> That is, according to Roberts, because God exists as wholly Other for Barth, God is likewise wholly unknowable, except self-referentially. "God is known by God alone".<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, if God exists as wholly Other, then there is a diminished sense of God's immanence in present historical contexts because wholly Otherness is a state of non-involvement. What results for Roberts, then, is the picture of Barth as a hopeless theologian because, "[i]n eschatological terms, a failure to engage with [historical contexts] could result in failure to incorporate all manner of human hopes for the contingent future into Christian hope, and/or to forsake participation in

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<sup>15</sup> John C. McDowell, *Hope in Barth's Eschatology: Interrogations and Transformations Beyond Tragedy*, (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2000), p. 41. McDowell does not agree with Roberts's conclusion that Barth interprets Christ "unrealistically", but he does affirm that Barth avoids the kind of metaphysical enquiry that we have noted marked Niebuhr's realism.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Richard H. Roberts, "The Ideal and the Real in the Theology of Karl Barth", in Stephen Sykes and Derek Holmes (eds.), *New Studies in Theology I*, (London: Duckworth, 1980), p. 165; cited in McDowell, p. 42.

transformatory practice in the present".<sup>18</sup> In other words, Barth's dialecticism, in Roberts's opinion, drives him to a position of at least moral ambiguity, if not moral irresponsibility.

Niebuhr agrees with Roberts on this point, particularly with regard to what he considers Barth's "undiscriminating neutrality" in reference to the issue of totalitarian communism in Russia. Drawing attention to Barth's dialecticism, Niebuhr writes that Barth's theology is "too 'eschatological' and too transcendent" to be of much practical use.<sup>19</sup> In fact, Niebuhr thinks that Barth's "theological framework is defective for wise political decisions...[because it] is too consistently 'eschatological' for the 'nicely calculated less and more' which must go into political decisions".<sup>20</sup> This, to Niebuhr, is "an amateur intrusion of absolute religious judgements into the endless relativities of the political order".<sup>21</sup> In other words, Barth's eschatology, to Niebuhr, is so far removed from existential concerns that "all the distinctions which seem momentous on the 'earthly' level are dwarfed into insignificance" from the realm of eschatology".<sup>22</sup>

McDowell thinks that readings like Roberts's and Niebuhr's miss Barth's eschatological point. Rather than emphasising God's transcendental detachment from historical contexts Barth, according to McDowell, points to Christ as the one who *immanently* transcends the divide between God and humans. God is thus, through divine action in Christ, wholly related to humans at the level of their existentiality. Independent objectivity is not the issue for Barth; God's involvement with humanity through Christ is. There is a sense of futurity that is important to Barth's eschatology but, according to McDowell, this futurity does not exist outside of human contexts. Instead, the future already exists in the present alongside, and because of, the actuality of Christ, who has come into the present, and who is himself the end, the Omega of history. Because "redemption has come in Christ *alone*...[it] remains an eschatological concept (i.e., future *for us*)".<sup>23</sup> But this does not mean that Barth disregards the present, a fear Niebuhr harbours with regard to any discussion

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<sup>18</sup> McDowell, p. 44..

<sup>19</sup> Niebuhr, "Why is Barth Silent on Hungary?" in *Essays in Applied Christianity*, p. 184.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 186.

<sup>21</sup> Niebuhr, "The Moral and Political Judgements of Christians", in *Christianity and Crisis*, 19 (July 6, 1959): 101, cited in Biggar, *The Hastening That Waits*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 23, n. 81.

<sup>22</sup> Niebuhr, "Why is Barth Silent on Hungary?", p. 184.

<sup>23</sup> McDowell, p. 56.

that involves eschatology. "Talk of the presence of the Future [i.e., Christ], therefore, does not mean that the eschatological Future is being emptied of significance, or time; it refers instead to *Christ's* personal presence".<sup>24</sup> In other words, God remains separate from us transcendentally, but does still come to us immanently in the person of Christ.<sup>25</sup> It is in this regard that Barth understands Christ as the *Eschatos*, the "last" One in whom is grounded the obligation to act morally in the first place. Thus,

Barth does not intend to speak prematurely about the details of the content of the Future, but rather grounds Christian hope's practice 'realistically' in Christ; shapes hope's direction by what hope knows of Christ as *Eschatos*; and sustains its confidence and provides its momentum during hope's critically interrogative and transformative performance for society's humanisation, in the time of eschatological provisionality.<sup>26</sup>

In other words, Barth's eschatology avoids the kinds of concerns Niebuhr has with regard to talk about eschatology becoming too "other-worldly". This is so precisely because Barth grounds his understanding of eschatology in a disposition which is both "this-worldly" and which seeks to understand the obligation of the moral agent to act in present historical contexts under the aegis of a future-oriented Christological eschatology that is immanently present among us. In this respect, because of the claim that the future comes into the present, Barth's eschatology is founded on a Christological emphasis similar to the one accorded to Niebuhr in these last two chapters. That is, Barth's emphasis on Christ as "future" can also be understood as what I have here called Niebuhr's "essential" Christ, the Christ of faith who comes to us from afar.

Despite the fact that Niebuhr ultimately thinks of Barth's eschatology as being too involved with the absurdities of otherworldliness, he does acknowledge that Barth's eschatology at least begins heading in the right direction precisely

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55. Underlining mine; italics McDowell's.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. chapter five, pp.

<sup>26</sup> McDowell, p. 56. McDowell's use of "realism" here does not mean the same thing as Niebuhr's use of that term as it has been employed throughout this thesis. What McDowell appears to mean is not that Barth locates hope in an objective, independent reality (though he surely is not denying that Barth does this, either), but that the Christology intrinsic to Barth's eschatology means that the moral agent can ground his or her hope in Christ who is immanently present in the socio-political "realities" of everyday existence.



because of the note of realism that Barth sounds and that McDowell highlights. As Niebuhr writes of Barth's eschatology, "Let us acknowledge with gratitude that we have here no new escape from the world of reality. The true Christian according to Barth continues to look upon the brutalities of history with wholesome contrition. He knows that he is a part of a world and that his sins have helped to create it".<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, Niebuhr thinks that though Barth's eschatology is well-founded, Barth ultimately misunderstands the application of a realistic ethic to eschatology. "I still insist", says Niebuhr, "that if the Barthians gave themselves more vigorously to the social task they would not be quite so pessimistic about history, because vigorous moral activity creates its own eschatology".<sup>28</sup> This is the exact reading that McDowell seeks to correct by suggesting that Barth's eschatology is only intelligible when Christ is interpreted as the *Eschatos* (with the essential Christ existentially present) and eschatology is not some effort at end-times conjecture, but is related specifically to historical contexts, and thus gives us a basis for hope grounded with Christ presently and in the future.

When interpreted in this way, the troubles Niebuhr finds with Barth's eschatology are alleviated. Moreover, eschatological reflections that emphasise the importance of who Christ is for us *now* invite the opportunity to reflect more seriously on the nature of what kind of eschatology is apropos to a realism such as Niebuhr's which seeks to take seriously the existential nature of Christ's presence without losing any of its essential, or metaphysical import. Let us consider how such an interpretation of eschatology relates to Christian realism and how it is instructive for better understanding the ways in which Niebuhr's Christian realism is ultimately a hopeful ethic.

#### 7.5. Niebuhr and Eschatological "Unity"

McDowell's interpretation of Barth's eschatology as grounded in the realities of human existence, yet hopefully bound to Christ's essential and existential natures is a helpful corrective for two reasons. First, it points to the similarities Niebuhr and Barth share on the issue of eschatology's importance for present historical contexts, especially when understood Christologically. Second, and more importantly, it highlights the fact that for Niebuhr, eschatology is relevant only on the condition that

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<sup>27</sup> Niebuhr, "Barth—Apostle of the Absolute" in *Essays in Applied Christianity*, p. 146.

eschatological reflections remain bound to historical exigencies. Simply put, Niebuhr is only interested in an eschatology that is incarnated, that is “made flesh”.

But this does not mean that the metaphysical concerns of realism are lost in the wake of the more practical demands of everyday existence. On the contrary, realist metaphysics is the lens through which those practical concerns are understood. Not only that, but theologically realistic metaphysics offer the basis for a hopeful realism, at least in Niebuhr’s articulation of Christian realism. In this regard, realist metaphysics offer a “unity” of essential and existential concerns. As Lovin notes, “The meaning of moral life, like the meaning of life as a whole, is eschatological. It is known in hope, but not reducible to theory”.<sup>29</sup> In other words, life points toward an eschatological end, a *telos*, in and by which we understand the meaning of life. This end is not yet, and therefore can only be understood in hope. Thus, for the realist, moral obligations in the contexts of human existence are understood because of the practical outworking of realist metaphysics in our everyday lives. But for the theological realist, the unity of essential and existential concerns is an “eschatological unity” and is found in the essential and existential Christ who is altogether transcendent and immanent. Moreover, as with Barth, eschatology points us to a hopeful ethic which is to be understood in the reality of human existence.

“More needs to be said”, Lovin continues, “about how this eschatological unity is anticipated ‘in concrete life and human action’...”.<sup>30</sup> The extension of that discussion is exactly what these final chapters seek to accomplish: bringing together the essential and existential components of Niebuhrian realism, and seeking to “know them in hope”. What I propose is that we can better attend to the hope that comes from Niebuhr’s eschatology by reading Niebuhrian realism through the lens of “ontological eschatology”, a task to which we will turn after introducing a contemporary thinker to help frame the discussion.

#### *7.5.1. A Contemporary Reading of Hope*

Charles Matthewes’s creative (and amusing) quote at the heading of this chapter confers on Niebuhr the often used appellation of a “hopeless” theologian.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>29</sup> Lovin, *Christian Realism and the New Realities*, p. 191.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

Matthewes recognises his association with others who similarly critique Niebuhr when he notes that "Niebuhr's work is often criticized for exploiting the Christian faith to underpin a kind of 'muscular' involvement in society, for ends that are never explicitly articulated but that seem to be fundamentally conservative and stabilizing, or 'realistic'".<sup>31</sup> That criticism is justified, Matthewes thinks, because Niebuhr's "account of hope seems to support that interpretation; for in some way Niebuhr's account is really about providing a kind of high-ampere yet moderating motivation for men-in-power—as he put it, 'The final wisdom of life requires, not the annulment of incongruity but the achievement of serenity within and above it'".<sup>32</sup> That is, on Matthewes's reading of Niebuhr,<sup>33</sup> hope is palliative; it counters our inclinations to despair in the face of the brutalities of existence and bolsters our capacity to cope with the fact that "we are men and not God". But hope, according to Matthewes, serves no social function for Niebuhr, offers no basis of "political mobilization" because it provides nothing more than a "political anesthetic, a societal pressure-release valve...".<sup>34</sup> It thus palliates the problems of human existence but, as with all anaesthetics, this kind of hope is only temporary.

What Niebuhr intends by the statement Matthewes quotes, however, is that all of our efforts at involvement in society are attenuated—not strengthened—by an optimistic (and ill-founded) resolve which fails to recognise the limits of the self within history, rather than inculcating a "humble acceptance of those limits".<sup>35</sup> This is the hope of the sentimentalist from chapter six. In fact, Niebuhr follows the statement quoted by Matthewes with the declaration that "[n]othing that is worth

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<sup>31</sup> Matthewes, p. 239.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* Citations to Niebuhr from *The Irony of American History*, p. 54. It is not clear what Matthewes means when he refers to Niebuhr's "account of hope". Niebuhr did not give an account of hope in the sense of a systematic treatment, the manner of which one would expect from a theologian. Moreover, his references to hope in *Irony of American History* are directed precisely at the kind of "general liberal hope of redeeming history" that he had similarly criticised with Rauschenbusch's social gospel. Cf., pp. 56-61.

<sup>33</sup> Matthewes's reading of Niebuhr's as a "muscular" Christianity is not altogether dissimilar from Hauerwas's claim (particularly since both Matthewes and Hauerwas draw on *The Irony of American History*) that Niebuhr understands his assignment to provide a theological justification for "making America work". See Hauerwas, *A Better Hope*, p. 29. Hauerwas's criticism, though, is part of his larger critique of the assimilation of specifically theological ethics into more general "religious" ethics, and the tendency of religious ethics to be based on philosophical accounts of ethics. Cf., *Ibid.*, pp. 58-64. On the other hand, Matthewes provides what, for all intents, seems to be as much of a philosophical as theological account of ethics. Perhaps for this reason, though he is critical of Niebuhr, Matthewes nevertheless offers a helpful framework through which to understand the eschatological nature of Niebuhrian realism.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238.

doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope”.<sup>36</sup> In other words, our lives presently can only be ordered by the placement of our hopes in that which is impossible, that which stands with the transcendent essence of God.

Nevertheless, Matthewes is correct that on his (Milbankian)<sup>37</sup> reading of Niebuhr on social involvement and its attendant hopes, “[Niebuhr’s] desire for ‘serenity’ can sound dangerously Stoic, confusing hope with a wilfulness that is not really hope at all”.<sup>38</sup> But this is only the case *if* one reads Niebuhr to mean that hope remains palliative and offers no reason for the moral agent to act confidently (but still realistically) for social redemption because of his or her assurance of the immanent love of God-in-Christ, which is, after all, the basis for the Christian realist’s social ethic. If, on the other hand, Niebuhr’s realism is read as the basis for theological hope, as I think it ought to be, we can see that there are actually similarities between the hope latent in Christian realism and Matthewes’s account of hope. This is particularly so with regard to eschatology, as we will now see.

#### 7.5.2. Niebuhr and Matthewes on Ontological Eschatology

His criticisms of what he understands to be unsubstantiated hope in Niebuhr’s realism notwithstanding, Matthewes offers compelling reflections on hopeful eschatology which are helpful for better understanding Niebuhr’s own eschatological approach and which, as with Barth, carefully avoid the kinds of concerns about eschatology that Niebuhr had.

The eschatology that Matthewes and Niebuhr share I will here refer to as *ontological eschatology* (which will be defined below). I am not unmindful of the fact that from the mid-twentieth century onward there is a tradition, particularly in Continental philosophy, focused on ontology and eschatology, which defines ontology as the “being-in-the-world” as a condition for the eschatological “possibility” of hope.<sup>39</sup> Matthewes’s and Niebuhr’s accounts, as we are about to see, are not dramatically different from this interpretation, since any ontological

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<sup>35</sup> Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, p. 55.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, p. 54.

<sup>37</sup> I do not mean here to imply that Matthewes is necessarily “radically orthodox”, but that the charge of Stoicism is strikingly similar to Milbank’s that was discussed in chapter five. However, Matthewes is certainly (critically) sympathetic with Milbank, particularly on their readings of Augustine’s importance for pluralistic social engagement. See Matthewes, pp. 121-129.

<sup>38</sup> Matthewes, p. 241.

<sup>39</sup> Cf., Chris Thornhill, “Utopian Emancipation: Bloch”, in Simon Glendinning (ed.), *The Edinburgh Encyclopedia of Continental Philosophy*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999): 483.



eschatology is at root about social hermeneutics; that is, it is about reflection on the import of ultimate hopes in the midst existential concerns. However, a more theological account of ontological eschatology seeks the kind of unity referred to above by Lovin as an eschatological “unity”. But it is an eschatological unity that endeavours to understand the transcendent ultimate hopes for the realist within the social contexts of that realist. As such—and in keeping with the themes of these last two chapters—this kind of ontological eschatology is centred on the person of Christ, rather than solely on the individual in his or her social contexts, and is as much about the future (properly understood, as we will see), as it is about the present.

But this does not mean that concern for the self is overlooked for, as Niebuhr notes, “[a]bsolute self-negation is impossible because the self is never in rational control of all the unconscious stirrings of selfhood”.<sup>40</sup> Instead, centring on the person of Christ means that the self is graciously able to forget itself, which provides “ultimate redemption from self-regard [salvation, for Niebuhr] by the infusion...of divine grace into the dynamics of human selfhood”.<sup>41</sup> That is, an ontological eschatology which focuses on the person of Christ embodies the kind of emphasis on God’s immanence that, as has been stressed thus far, is so important for understanding Niebuhr’s realism because the individual knows herself by forgetting herself in light of God’s immanence. She, in other words, loses her life and thus finds it (Matt. 16:25). Moreover, a theological approach to ontological eschatology mirrors the kinds of concerns addressed in this thesis: how the objective nature of morality, identified with the transcendent nature of God, is immanently present in human existence, and how it serves as the basis of hope for the realist.

#### 7.6. *Ontological Eschatology*

Matthewes begins his eschatological enquiry which leads to a hopeful theology for the Christian by asking the kinds of questions which we have thus far asked of Niebuhr’s Christian realism: “What does it mean to say that we live in hope? And what are the theological preconditions and implications of a life so lived?”<sup>42</sup> He answers:

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<sup>40</sup> Niebuhr, *Man’s Nature and His Communities*, p. 90.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p. 91.

<sup>42</sup> Matthewes, p. 74.

In hope, we see the world as revelatory of more than its immediate, and superficial, self-presentation. In hope we affirm our confidence in God's sovereignty, and our conviction that God will be all in all. In hope we see the world as intelligible only as God's story—not properly a 'world', with the spurious posture of autonomy that the word conveys, but rather as *Creation*, an event, irrepressibly expressing a self-transcending reference, the act of a loving Creator. We see the world as significant...and we live in the world...in hope...by treating the world as not exhaustively immanently and immediately significant, but as crucially transcendentally and eschatologically significant.<sup>43</sup>

In other words, to hope theologically means to look toward the end of history for the meaning of history, and to understand that God is immanent in, but also transcendent in, history. Niebuhr agrees with Matthewes's presentation of revelation as a portrait of God who stands eschatologically at the end of creation's history, which is "the story of God":

The form [of revelation] is that of a story, an event through which the meaning of the whole of history is apprehended and the specific nature of the divine sovereignty of history is revealed. It is presented as the last in a series of God's 'mighty acts', and one which has a particularly definitive character. Whatever may happen in subsequent ages nothing can occur which will shake the faith of a true believer in God's sovereignty over all history....The revelatory power of this whole story...requires that it be viewed not as a spectator might view an ordinary drama....[The drama] require[s] that it be apprehended by man in the total unity of his personality and not merely by his reason.<sup>44</sup>

In short, it is not until the "end" of the revelatory story that we can know the meaning of life in its entirety. The "total unity of personality" is Niebuhr's expression for the combination of the essential with the existential person. As with the Christ of faith and the Christ of history, the human is a creature whose essence stands ultimately with God, but who is at the same time a finite creature. The Christian realist thus acknowledges that her being resides with God, but that this does not absolve her of responsibility for citizenship in her current contexts. Only once this acknowledgement is made does the revelation of God-in-Christ make sense, and give life its meaning. "[Revelation] will not touch [the human] essentially

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, pp. 159-160.

if he does not recognize that its form as revelation challenges him as a rational though finite creature who is incapable of giving meaning to the total dimension of his individual and collective history...".<sup>45</sup> This, then, is the definition of ontological eschatology as it will be used for the remainder of the chapter: the acknowledgement of God-in-Christ as transcendent over, and immanent within history as a reflection of the humanity's own essential being-with-God and existential citizenship in present historical contexts. Put briefly, ontological eschatology is about the future being brought into the present. It is incarnate eschatology concerned with "life in the world".<sup>46</sup>

There are several points which form the foundation of ontological eschatology and which Matthewes addresses. For the sake of the present argument, though, I will only address the most important of those.

Matthewes offers an Augustinian understanding of citizenship in the world. He notes that life in the world today is typically lived at cross purposes and that "we are living so far beyond our means that our present behavior threatens to consume our future".<sup>47</sup> The antidote to this despairing analysis, Matthewes thinks, is to revisit the Augustinian distinction between "using the world" and "loving the world". He recognises that the terminology of "using the world" today is cause for unease among many people because one's use of the world demonstrates a putative willingness to be unconcerned with the injustices of the world, or to be "wantonly rapacious" of the world's resources.<sup>48</sup> Those who criticise the notion of using the world do so on the basis that it results in an "otherworldliness" of the kind that Niebuhr criticises in his appraisals of eschatology. That is, users of the world manipulate the world's resources and citizens because their concern is not for this world, but for a world that is not yet known; a utopia.

These critics counter the notion of using the world with "loving the world" which essentially means "a respectful recognition of and sensitivity to limits, a recognition that human aims must be restrained by some absolute boundaries, that human desires may simply not be justifiably realizable".<sup>49</sup> This sounds very much

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, p. 160.

<sup>46</sup> Matthewes, pp. 74-104.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, p. 75.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, p. 75 n. 1.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, p. 77.

like Niebuhr's realism because of the emphasis on living within one's limits and recognising that there are objective boundaries to human existence which are put in place by God. In fact, the denial of limits and boundaries is precisely why Niebuhr thinks that Western society existed in a state of "political and social confusion" in the years following World War II. "The interpretation of our present disorder", Niebuhr writes, "is usually...involved in the error of assuming that it is possible to define the order of God in detailed and specific laws and rules of justice". It is true that "[t]here are basic conditions set by God to which human life must conform. But these cannot be identified with any particular social or political organization".<sup>50</sup>

In light of this, then, Niebuhr might plausibly be read to be suggesting something similar to those who advocate "loving the world" in the way Matthewes has described the term. The problem with this disposition, as Matthewes notes, is that

[s]uch claims echo ancient Stoic demands that we live in accord with *nomos*, and that such life primarily involves a practice of restraint on our part. But this is wrong. Of course we should recognize the propriety of limits, of basic commandments that must not be violated, basic covenants that cannot be broken. But God's desire for humans is not fundamentally proscriptive, concerned with setting limits.<sup>51</sup>

On this point Niebuhr agrees with Matthewes. As Niebuhr notes, "The natural limits of geography, language, and ethnic affinity [limits Niebuhr thinks of as determined by God] always remain as one factor of cohesion in the human community; but they are determinative in the negative sense. Positively the law of human existence for man as free spirit, *who transcends natural limitations*, is the law of love".<sup>52</sup> Moreover, says Niebuhr, "[t]he transcendent perspective of religion makes all men our brothers and nullifies the divisions, by which nature, climate, geography and the accidents of history divide the human family".<sup>53</sup> In other words, Niebuhr (with Matthewes) thinks that though there are natural restrictions that humans cannot transcend, they are nevertheless essentially free creatures who do

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<sup>50</sup> Niebuhr, "God's Design and the Present Disorder of Civilization" in *Faith and Politics*, p. 105.

<sup>51</sup> Matthewes, p. 77. It is interesting that Matthewes offers the same criticism of those who advocate "loving the world" as Milbank does of Niebuhr's realism. While Matthewes is not speaking specifically about Niebuhr in this instance, he is, as noted above, critical of Niebuhr on the issue of hope. Nevertheless, there are similarities between the two thinkers that are worth considering.

<sup>52</sup> "God's Design and the Present Disorder of Civilization", p. 105.

<sup>53</sup> Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p. 71.



operate under a law, but that the law is the law of love. The problem is that “[m]an...always is contradicting and defying the law of love”,<sup>54</sup> which results in *misuse* of the world’s citizens and resources.

Matthewes offers an Augustinian critique of those who would have us love, rather than use the world by suggesting that the distinction Augustine draws between the use and love of the world drives not a schism between the functions of using and loving an object but, in fact, draws these two functions closer together. “[W]e should seek not fundamentally to limit our desires, but to have them reoriented to their properly infinite end. We should care about the world not more, but in a different way than we currently do. Our loves must be not restrained but *reoriented*”.<sup>55</sup> What does drive the schism between these functions is the misuse of love. “To know what a man’s disposition is in regard to a particular object, we need to know not only whether he ‘loves’ it or not but also, or rather, in what way he ‘loves’ it. For the love of something for its own sake...as the finally satisfying quelling of one’s longing is very different from the ‘love’ of something desired as a means to something else”.<sup>56</sup> That is to say that the proper love *and* use of the world can only be achieved when one orient’s one’s love to its proper ends in the first place, and only then can the functions of using and loving be understood as complementary.

### 7.7. *Reoriented Love*

This reorientation of love takes on a distinctively ontological (and existential) character, and two ideas that have featured prominently in the chapters so far serve to inform the nature of this ontology. The first of these is the notion that, according to Matthewes, love itself undergirds the basis of an Augustinian ontological reorientation of love. Human existence, that is, “creation[,] is a work of love, and [it] shows the marks of love—so much so that love is itself the fundamental ontological truth about creation”.<sup>57</sup> This idea is what Niebuhr associates with what he calls the “law of love” which, as noted in chapter three, is the natural law. Not only this but, more specifically, love is the basis of human nature in this

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<sup>54</sup> Niebuhr, *Man’s Nature and His Communities*, p. 29.

<sup>55</sup> Matthewes, p. 77.

<sup>56</sup> R.A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 66.

<sup>57</sup> Matthewes, pp. 79-80.

interpretation of an Augustinian ontology. "Love...is the 'root' of the soul, and when the soul is properly oriented in the love that is *caritas*, it is a unifying force, equally for our own self-integrity, our relationship with God, and our relationship with our neighbour".<sup>58</sup> In Matthewes's reading of Augustine, when love is "used" properly, it orients the individual properly to God, neighbour and self.

Love, of course, commences its reorientation in the self and go forth from there. In this sense, "[t]he egocentric perspective may be where we start from in this fallen life, and we may be generally teleological in our behavior....While we are entrusted with the care of ourselves in a special way, not only are genuine self-concern and genuine other regard compatible, but the former even requires the latter".<sup>59</sup> In other words, the self cannot be disregarded in consideration of love. The self is as much a part of a loving relationship as that which is the object of love. Without the self, love cannot exist. Niebuhr agrees, but he sees a danger in self-idolatry in a too-absolute formulation of this doctrine. "Augustine", says Niebuhr, "wants us to love the neighbor for the sake of God, which may be a correct formulation; but he wants us to prove the genuineness of our love of God in the love of the neighbour, or by leading him to God". The problem with this, as Niebuhr sees it, is that "it does not answer another important question: when I love a person or a community do I love myself in them or do I truly love them?"<sup>60</sup> Here we revisit the aforementioned issue of vertical transcendence. To Niebuhr's mind, only the Christ of faith is capable of loving sacrificially (*agape*), which is exemplified in his death on the cross, "a scandal in the field of rational religion".<sup>61</sup> In this sense, the vertical transcendence of God over all of history's contingencies emphasises the human tendency toward idolatry because nothing can stand in starker contrast to the nature of human sin than the perfect love of God-in-Christ. But the recognition of this actually inspires hope in the human. As Niebuhr says, "...Christ and the Cross reveal not only the possibilities but the limits of human finitude in order that a more ultimate hope may arise from the contrite recognition of those limits".<sup>62</sup> In other

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<sup>58</sup> Matthewes, p. 81.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, p. 82.

<sup>60</sup> Niebuhr, "Augustine's Political Realism" in *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, pp. 139-140.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, p. 140.

<sup>62</sup> Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, pp. 120-121.

words, once we recognise our limits, our hope can rightly be placed in God as the one who overcomes those limits for us through love. The recognition of our limits paradoxically frees us from those limits when we understand that Christ is the one who breaks these limits on our behalf.

Daniel Rice observes that Niebuhr's "view [is] that both love, which is the law of life, and self-love, which is a violation of that law, speak...radically and truly about the heights and depths of existence...". Moreover, "Niebuhr saw the vertical dimension of sin between the self and God in terms of idolatry...".<sup>63</sup> In other words, when the self tries to love God through others, its temptation is to usurp God and love the self instead, resulting in idolatry; thus, Niebuhr's concern about loving the other as an expression simply of loving the self writ large.

Niebuhr's reading of Augustine, I think, misses the point here.<sup>64</sup> What Niebuhr does not consider is that Augustine is mindful of the fact that the improper orientation of love leads to the problem of inordinate love of the self—either by seeking to love the self in the other, or by replacing God with the object of one's love—which is idolatry.<sup>65</sup> This is precisely the problem Augustine addresses when, in the *Confessions*, he writes of the despair he suffered following the death of his close friend; despair that resulted from the improper orientation of his love. "The reason why that grief had penetrated me so easily and deeply was that I had poured out my soul...loving a person sure to die as if he would never die. The greatest source of repair and restoration was the solace of other friends, with whom I loved what I loved as a substitute for you...".<sup>66</sup> But Augustine is not actually addressing the problem that Niebuhr thinks he is. The problem with Niebuhr's interpretation of Augustine is that Niebuhr assumes Augustine to be speaking about love idealistically when, in point of fact, for Augustine

there is nothing idealistic in the word [love]. We have not leaped with one bound to that love which 'bears all things, believes all things'....To invoke *that* love prematurely has often been a

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<sup>63</sup> Daniel F. Rice, *Reinhold Niebuhr and John Dewey: An American Odyssey*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), pp. 236-237.

<sup>64</sup> To be fair, Niebuhr does think that love is the basis of human nature, not egoism. See *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 39. He just does not view love in the same "pre-moral" fashion as Augustine; it is always already tainted by the original sin of pride.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Oliver O'Donovan, *The Problem of Self-Love in St. Augustine*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006), pp. 29-32.

<sup>66</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, IV. viii (13), p. 60.

temptation in Christian reflection on society, signaling...a forgetfulness of the sting of sin. For Augustine the love that forms communities is undetermined with respect to its object, and so also undetermined with respect to its moral quality....<sup>67</sup>

In other words, what Augustine intends when he speaks of love is that love is simply an ontological reality, without which we cannot understand our relationships to another person because we do not know what it means to love (or, hate)<sup>68</sup> that person. No moral value is accorded to love on these terms. At least not yet.

### 7.7.1. *Resolving Idolatry*

This is not to suggest that idolatry and sinfulness are never potential problems in Augustine's conception of the use of love; they are.<sup>69</sup> But the way those problems are addressed is through the second necessary disposition regarding the reorientation of love: the recognition that the function of love is related to God, who is both transcendent and immanent. Matthewes notes that the "dialectic of divine immanence and transcendence so basic to [Augustine's] theology and ontology...serves at the metaphysical link between the basically theological language of 'sin as idolatry' and the...language of 'sin as disordered loves'".<sup>70</sup> That is, God's transcendence and immanence (which, as we have observed, occur in the "Christ of faith" and the "Christ of history", respectively) provide the lens through which we can properly know what it means to be idolatrous or sinful. On the one hand, when we try to take the place of the Christ of faith as lord, we are idolatrous. On the other, when we fail to love God by loving our neighbours as the Christ of history did, we are sinful. In either case, this dialecticism reminds us that "Christ is what we ought to be and also what we cannot be".<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *Common Objects of Love: Moral Reflection and the Shaping of Community*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), p. 22.

<sup>68</sup> As O'Donovan notes, "[E]very determination of love implies a corresponding hatred. For a community to focus its love on *this* constellation of goods is to withdraw its love from *that*". *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> This is particularly the case in Augustine's famous distinction between the founding of the two cities of God and humans, which "have been created by two loves: that is, the earthly by love of self extending even to contempt of God, and the heavenly by love of God extending to contempt of self". Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, XIV. xxviii, ed. by R.W. Dyson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 621.

<sup>70</sup> Matthewes, pp. 88-89.

<sup>71</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. II, p. 204.



An ontological eschatology, then, requires first that the moral agent understands love as the “law” on which all human nature is based; and second, that the acceptance of the dialectic of divine transcendence and immanence prevents that law from perverting love into the idolatry that Niebuhr worries so much about. “The dialectic of transcendence and immanence”, in other words, “serves as a critical tool against all forms of idolatry, both those that implant God too immanently within the world [by loving others in place of God], and those that remove God too transcendently from it [by replacing God with the self]”.<sup>72</sup>

This Augustinian appraisal of citizenship I have called ontological eschatology for two reasons. “Ontological” because it regards love as the basis of human nature and relationships between humans.<sup>73</sup> It is ontological, in other words, because it understands love as the very ground of being. Moreover, love exists *prima facie* without the distinctions for what *kinds* of love are involved in those relationships which make up our relationships with others. Love only becomes idolatrous or sinful as it is oriented improperly; as it “goes out” from us and is directed toward many ends. This is why Niebuhr astutely observes that “[t]he weaknesses of the spirit of love in solving larger and more complex problems become increasingly apparent as one proceeds from ordinary relations between individuals to the life of social groups”.<sup>74</sup>

This Augustinian appraisal is also “eschatological” because it is concerned with the *ends* to which our love is directed. In a properly oriented eschatology, we understand the “reality” of Christ through the other person because our love is given over to Christ by our love for the other person. It is Christ, not the other person, who is the “end” to whom we devote our love, but we can only understand this orientation of love through our existential contexts. Thus, “[t]he reality that we grasp existentially...is the *other person*, who is at once our door to ontology and to ethics....to grasp the reality of the other person is to grasp that there is a reality apart

<sup>72</sup> Matthewes, p. 89.

<sup>73</sup> Robert Song thinks Niebuhr’s ontology is grounded instead in the pervasiveness of sin, which leads to Niebuhr’s criticisms of progressive liberalism. Song is right, of course, that sin is a chief component in Niebuhr’s theological anthropology, but I think that Niebuhr’s conception of the law of love is much more important for understanding his ontology in relation to theological hope because it is through attempts to embody the law of love for the Other that we begin to understand why we can have hope in Christ in the first place. See Robert Song, *Christianity and Liberal Society*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 60-65.

<sup>74</sup> Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p. 74.

from ourself [realism]; so the other person is a 'universal horizon'".<sup>75</sup> That is, devoting our love to our neighbours (or, our enemies)<sup>76</sup> is the way that we apprehend that we are known in love by God and, thus, that we know that "God is love". But because love can be devoted to more ends than other humans only (i.e., to a cause, to a possession, to a nation, etc.), in order for that orientation to occur, the realist's love must be directed to the proper end, who is, as observed above, Christ; the last "one", or the "Eschatos".<sup>77</sup>

This is what I take "eschatological unity" to mean for the Christian realist. As Niebuhr says, "[t]he unity of God is not static, but potent and creative. God is, therefore, love. The conscious impulse of unity between life and life is the most adequate symbol of his nature. All life stands under responsibility to this loving will".<sup>78</sup> In other words, we understand God's transcendent love (in Christ) as immanently present in our existential contexts, and through the unity of love we achieve with others. This love demands of us moral responsibility. Before moving on, we need to consider the "eschatology" of ontological eschatology.

#### *7.8. Projecting Hope: Futurity and Christian Realism*

In the years following the conclusion of World War II, the voice Niebuhr had given to Christian realism and, for that matter, the neo-orthodoxy of Niebuhr's contemporaries began to be ostracised among those who posited a more radical assessment of a Christian social ethic for relevance social contexts. This was particularly true in the case of liberation theologians from Latin America.<sup>79</sup> The logic among those who were dissatisfied was that their predecessors, the theologians of the mid-twentieth century, had not offered an adequate social ethic which gave way to hope in their respective neo-orthodox theologies. While neo-orthodoxy provided

<sup>75</sup> O'Donovan, citing Robert Spaemann, *Common Objects of Love*, p. 10.

<sup>76</sup> Niebuhr give a "pre-moral" understanding to loving our enemies when he says that "we are asked to love our enemies that we may be children of our Father in Heaven. An attitude of spirit is enjoined without any prudential or selfish consideration. We are not told to love our enemies because in that case they will love us in return. The love that is asked of us does not move on the plane of emotion or desire". Niebuhr, "Love Your Enemies" in *Love and Justice*, p. 220.

<sup>77</sup> Though he does not name it explicitly, this is what I believe Matthewes means when he says that our love has to be reoriented to its properly "infinite" end.

<sup>78</sup> Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 38.

<sup>79</sup> Ronald H. Stone, *Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politicians*, (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981). Stone notes that in contrast to liberation theologians, "Niebuhr's major hope was in fulfillment beyond history", p. 236. That is partly true, as we saw in the last chapter. However, as we have seen with ontological eschatology here, I think it remains to be seen that Niebuhr understood hope in transhistorical terms only.

insightful accounts of human nature, of biblical hermeneutics and of the abiding importance of Christian doctrines in the midst of an increasingly technological and scientifically-minded world, to the minds of liberation theologians, it failed to provide an insightful reason for hope in the present. To this point, A.J. Conyers notes that in the 1960s,

[i]t was becoming apparent to a growing sector of the theological world that neo-orthodoxy, while releasing the biblical message from its often calamitous bondage to historical criticism, was not wholly capable of expressing itself then in relation to the concrete historical community of men except through the medium of a privatized and timeless religion. It seemed that to the extent it abandoned its moorings in concrete historicity it likewise became inapplicable to its concrete social and historical context.<sup>80</sup>

In other words, to the liberation theologians—neo-orthodoxy in general, and Christian realism in particular—was ensnared in the tortuous habit of “moral reflection” instead of the more practical undertaking of “moral deliberation”; it was concerned more with the evaluation of “facts” than the contemplation of “acts”.<sup>81</sup> As Conyers notes, “[i]f there is a common point of departure for these [liberation] theologians, it consists in the conviction that [the neo-orthodox], whatever the merits of the lines of reconstruction they undertook, failed to preserve the dynamic, world-shattering character of Christian eschatology”.<sup>82</sup> In a word, liberationists found their neo-orthodox counterparts “hopeless” because they thought that the neo-orthodox offered no substantive eschatology which could provide a basis for Christian hope.

An adequate eschatology to the liberation theologians was one which sought to interpret the realities of injustice in any given social context in light of the fact that those injustices were not representative of the kinds of contexts in which humans are intended to live.<sup>83</sup> The gospel, they believed, promised the perfect reign

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<sup>80</sup> A.J. Conyers, *God, Hope, and History: Jürgen Moltmann and the Christian Concept of History*, (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1988), p. 50.

<sup>81</sup> For more on this, see O'Donovan, *Common Objects of Love*, pp. 1-9.

<sup>82</sup> Conyers, p. 51.

<sup>83</sup> Rubem Alves, in his critique of Christian realism, frames his understanding of utopianism in a more negative sense: “...Christian utopianism...is not a belief in the possibility of a perfect society but rather the belief in the nonnecessity of *this* imperfect order. It does not claim that it is possible to abolish sin, but it affirms that there is no reason for us to accept the rule of the sinful structures that now control our society”. Rubem Alves, “Christian Realism: Ideology of the Establishment” in *Christianity and Crisis* (September 17, 1973): 173-176. Of course, Niebuhr famously makes a similar point when he notes the “inevitability” but nonnecessity of sin. See Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. I, p. 263.

of Christ in the future, but also in the present. It was, in this sense, that theirs was a vision of social utopianism—stressing the existential elements of human life—which they believed that neo-orthodoxy, and Christian realism like it, failed to provide. Theirs was also, though, a vision not entirely distinct from the eschatology of the European theologians from which the liberation theologians sought so vigorously to dissociate; particularly the ubiquitous “realised eschatology” of their time period.<sup>84</sup>

Due to the limitations of this project we will not here consider the history of realised eschatology, which was given a contemporary interpretation by C. H. Dodd during the middle of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, it is a helpful way of thinking about eschatology’s relationship to the way hope has been described here.

Briefly stated, realised eschatology argues that the kingdom of God, actualised in the person of Christ, has come with the “Christ of history” and will come again in the “Christ of faith”. This may sound amenable to the account we have given on Christian realism’s hope thus far, but Niebuhr himself is actually critical of accounts of realised eschatology: “The modern theory of ‘realized eschatology’ according to which the coming of Christ effectively fulfils Messianic prophecies and reduces the promises of a second coming in the New Testament to insignificance”, Niebuhr tells us, “must be challenged. The strain of thought embodied in the New Testament hope of a ‘second coming’ is indispensable for the Christian interpretation of history and for a true understanding of New Testament thought”.<sup>85</sup>

The problem, as Niebuhr sees it, is that reflections in the vein of realized eschatologies fail to account for the basic message of New Testament eschatology: that the Christ of faith is coming again. Niebuhr is not here genuflecting to a literalism of the sort he at other points chastises. Literal interpretations of scripture have the unfortunate, if ironic, tendency of seeing the trees, but not the forest, a fact of which Niebuhr is well aware. Niebuhr thinks this is especially true with regard to the issue of Christ’s “second coming”. “We are therefore deceivers, yet true, when

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<sup>84</sup> For an account of the interactions and eventual rupture that took place between Latin American theologians and their European counterparts, see Jürgen Moltmann’s *Experiences in Theology: Ways and Forms of Christian Theology*, translated by Margaret Kohl, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), pp. 217-220. See also Moltmann’s important letter to Latin American theologian, Jose Miguez Bonino, “An Open Letter to Jose Miguez Bonino” in *Christianity and Crisis* 36 (1976): 57-63, which was largely responsible for kicking off a decade of discontent between the two sides.

<sup>85</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. II, p. 48.



we insist that the Christ who died on the cross will come again.... We do not believe that the human enterprise will have a tragic conclusion; but the ground of our hope lies not in human capacity but in divine power and mercy, in the character of the *ultimate reality*, which carries the human enterprise".<sup>86</sup> That is, the point of a second coming is not tied to some kind of divine foretelling, but to the hope that is placed in Christ. But disregarding the central message of Christ's return is only one part of the problem for realised eschatology, according to Niebuhr.

The other, more significant, issue with realised eschatology is that it misinterprets what history is. "The full implication of the double idea that the 'Kingdom of God has come' and that it is 'coming' is that history is an interim".<sup>87</sup> History, in other words, exists both after Christ and anticipates Christ's return, but it is not accorded any real meaning of its own in the time between. The problem with this is, to Niebuhr's mind, the person of Christ is relegated to a position of irrelevance. "In thus conceiving history after Christ as an interim between the disclosure of its true meaning and the fulfillment of that meaning, between the revelation of divine sovereignty and the full establishment of that sovereignty, a continued element of inner contradiction in history is accepted as its perennial characteristic".<sup>88</sup> The fleeting character of history—that is, history made up of the absurdities of human existence—takes on a more permanent nature when one interprets present history as an interim because it fails to account for both the transcendent and immanent Christ of hope. History is meaningful, but it stands to lose its meaning when the immediate context is considered as only an interim and not as part and parcel to the whole of history's meaning, which is found in Christ.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, it is Christ who, for Niebuhr, resolves the problem of the loss of history's meaning, and who saves us "by hope":

[The] fact of death threatens life with meaninglessness unless man is 'saved by hope' and understands life in such a way that neither his involvement in history nor his transcendence over it destroys the meaning of life. To understand life and history according to the

<sup>86</sup> Niebuhr, "As Deceivers, Yet True", p. 24. Italics mine.

<sup>87</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. II, p. 48.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, p. 49.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. Ruurd Veldhuis on Niebuhr's understanding of "Christian Hope and the Fulfilment of History" in Ruurd Veldhuis, *Realism Versus Utopianism?: Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Realism and the relevance of Utopian Thought for Social Ethics*, (Assen: Koninklijke Van Gorcum & Comp. B.V., 1975), pp. 60-63.

meaning given it by Christ is to be able to survey the chaos of any present or the peril of any future, without sinking into despair. It is to have a vantage point from which one may realize that momentary securities are perennially destroyed both by the vicissitudes of history and by the fact of death which stands over all history.<sup>90</sup>

That is to say that the immanent Christ fills the lacuna left in realised eschatology's "interim" of history by according a certain viewpoint from which all future *and* present historical exigencies are interpreted. There is, then, no part of human history that is lost in meaninglessness or despair because it is the reality of Christ who gives both meaning and hope to human existence.

I have made mention of the relationship between Christian realism, neo-orthodoxy and liberation theology precisely because I think that the criticisms the liberation theologians levelled at the neo-orthodox theologians—and, by extension, Christian realism—for their eschatological viewpoints highlight the important areas of Niebuhr's thought that we have been discussing for the past two chapters; namely, the role that the Christ of faith and Christ of history play as a foundation of hope in Niebuhrian realism.

My point in this, though, has been to stress that Niebuhr, like liberation theologians, is critical of realised eschatology, but for different reasons. Whereas the liberation theologians thought of their (mostly) European counterparts as focusing too much on the futurity inseparable from eschatological discussions, which was evident in realised eschatology, Niebuhr thinks of realised eschatology's focus as improperly construing futurity. But he does not want to discard the importance of futurity all together. Rather, he thinks that the hope found in the notion of Christ's "return" is the capstone to any eschatology which can help us give meaning to present historical circumstances. The irony, which is no doubt appreciated by the Niebuhrian realist, is that Niebuhr here is critical of realised eschatology not because it is too future-oriented, but because it is not future-oriented *enough*.

Commenting on the doctrine of the resurrection of the body which coincides with the second coming of Christ, Niebuhr stresses the importance of eschatological "futurity" when he states that "...to insist that the body must be *resurrected* is to understand that time and history have meaning only as they are borne by an eternity which transcends them. They could in fact not be at all without that eternity. For

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<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 51-52.

history would be meaningless succession without the eternal purpose which bears it".<sup>91</sup> Put differently, Niebuhr thinks that it is the transcendent Christ (in whom eternity is bound up), who is immanent among us that gives meaning to life. This dialectic of transcendence and immanence is how Niebuhr's eschatological reflections must be interpreted because it is through this dialectic that we come to understand Niebuhr's realism as an expression not of a despairing, but a hopeful Christian ethic.<sup>92</sup> As James Gustafson notes, "Niebuhr [has] confidence in a final outcome beyond tragedy, and the hope that this ensures is critical to his interpretation of the human prospect...".<sup>93</sup> That is, the final outcome of history (which *is* in the future) is the hopeful method by which we interpret our present existence.

But this is only the case if by "eschatology" we mean what I have described in this chapter so far: that discussions of eschatology are first and ultimately discussions about the *Eschatos*, Christ who, though transcendent, is "eternally present" among us; and, second, that a method of "ontological eschatology" which orients our love its proper ends, Christ in the other person, and by which we understand the "law of love" discussed in chapter three, is the best way to understand what Niebuhr's eschatology means. Both of these lead to more hopeful appreciations of Niebuhr's realism which, I think, is made especially clear in his comparisons of liberalism and Marxism with democracy.

### 7.9. *Overcoming Utopia*

As previously noted, the problem Niebuhr finds with Rauschenbusch's social gospel liberalism is that it identifies too easily with a sentimental utopianism that Niebuhr thinks anathema to a realistic Christian ethic. However, the other form of utopianism during the time of his writing (and the one most influential for the

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<sup>91</sup> Niebuhr, "The Fulfilment of Life" in *Beyond Tragedy*, p. 302.

<sup>92</sup> Thus, pace Gilkey, who posits a strict divide between those who associate eschatology with concerns about the future and Niebuhr, who he thinks of in terms of "this-worldliness" only, I am suggesting that the concerns about the future in eschatology cannot be discarded in Niebuhr's realism. Indeed, they give us part of our understanding about the bases of hope for Niebuhr. See Gilkey's "Niebuhr's Theology of History", p. 363.

<sup>93</sup> James M. Gustafson, *Intersections: Science, Theology, and Ethics*, (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1996), p. 30.

liberation theologians),<sup>94</sup> Marxist communism, Niebuhr does not think of as completely sentimentally utopian.<sup>95</sup> In fact, Niebuhr distinguishes between liberalism and communism by referring to them as “soft” and “hard” utopianisms, respectively.<sup>96</sup> Perhaps because of the earlier influence of Marxism on his thought, Niebuhr finds at least some amity with Marxist social analyses,<sup>97</sup> though he ultimately finds them lacking for several reasons. For our present purposes, we will only consider the most important of these, which is what Niebuhr calls Marxism’s “manipulation of destiny”.<sup>98</sup> By this he means that Marxism is guilty of determinism, of “underestimating the freedom of man and of emphasizing the determined character of his culture and his convictions...”.<sup>99</sup> Marxism’s positing of a “revolutionary act” in which humans “intervene in the course of history and thereby change not only history but the whole human situation” means that the human loses her humanity. That is, “after this act [of revolution] man is no longer both creature and creator of history but purely the creator who ‘not only proposes but also disposes’”.<sup>100</sup> The problem with this is that such a position, like realised eschatology above, leaves a cavity where eternity cannot become immanent in historical circumstances. Of course, Marxists are not likely to fret over the presence of theological lacunae, but Niebuhr’s criticism of the “hard” utopians on this point underscores the point made above: for Niebuhr our understanding of objective realism’s transcendence into our immanent social contexts is to be grounded in a theological understanding of the essential Christ’s existential presence. McCann makes this point when he notes that, for Niebuhr, the problem was not only that

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<sup>94</sup> For a brief, helpful analysis on the influences of Marxism on Latin American theologians, see David McLellan, *Marxism and Religion: A Description and Assessment of the Marxist Critique of Christianity*, (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1987), pp. 148-156.

<sup>95</sup> It should be noted that Niebuhr does not think Marxism is devoid of sentimental hope altogether. “The hope that there will ever be an ideal society, in which every one can take without restraint from the common social process ‘according to his need,’” Niebuhr says, “completely disregards the limitations of human nature. Man will always be imaginative enough to enlarge his needs beyond minimum requirements and selfish enough to feel the pressure of his needs more than the needs of others”. Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p. 196.

<sup>96</sup> See Niebuhr, *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics*, pp. 12-36.

<sup>97</sup> See especially Niebuhr’s *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, pp. 142-199 and *Does Civilization Need Religion?*, pp. 124-164. Dennis McCann offers a helpful delineation of the “stages” of thought Niebuhr goes through with regard to his appreciation of Marxism. See Dennis McCann, “Niebuhr and Maritain on Marxism” in *The Journal of Religion*, 58:2 (April, 1978): 145-153.

<sup>98</sup> Niebuhr, *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics*, pp. 30-31. See also, “The Master of Destiny” in *The Irony of American History*, pp. 56-76.

<sup>99</sup> Niebuhr, *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, p. 31.



Marxism provided an alternative eschatology to Christianity, but that it was an inadequate eschatology altogether because it undermined the whole “genius” of Christianity in the first place. Thus, for Niebuhr,

Christianity and Marxism were not to be compared simply formally, as two alternative eschatologies, one religious, the other secular. Beyond the formal comparison, Niebuhr saw that the Christian myth transformed the problem of meaning in history by providing human activity with a transcendent point of reference in a God who reconciles humanity to himself.<sup>101</sup>

Put succinctly, Marxism cannot provide an adequate account of how God transcends history and exists immanently in that history. This is the basis of existential hope, which gives impetus for moral action, a notion Niebuhr captures precisely with his statement that “[t]he hope of Christian faith that the Divine Power which bears history can complete what even the highest human striving must leave incomplete, and can purify the corruptions which appear in even the purest human aspirations, is an indispensable pre-requisite for diligent fulfilment of our historic tasks”.<sup>102</sup>

Niebuhr offers a “vindication” of democracy as an antidote to the hopelessness<sup>103</sup> void left by Marxism and liberalism. More specifically, he suggests that American democracy is representative of the kind political system that goes some way toward correcting the problems of hopelessness and despair that he perceives in Marxism and liberalism.

This defence of democracy is, of course, what begets the charge that Niebuhr’s political theology is too “muscular” to be considered the basis for Christian hope because he appears to be offering little more than a gloss of political conservatism over a tough-minded liberalism that has dulled with time. Of course, conservatives and liberals alike are happy to claim Niebuhr as their political ally,<sup>104</sup> but the veracity of a claim is never proven in the simple assertion of the claim itself. Whether or not Niebuhr is an agent provocateur for either liberals or conservatives is

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<sup>101</sup> McCann, p. 147.

<sup>102</sup> Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, p. 128.

<sup>103</sup> “Hopeless” because Niebuhr sees the goal of Marxism and liberalism as reducible to one, false hope. “That hope is that man may be delivered from his ambiguous position of being both creature and creator of the historical process and become unequivocally the master of his own destiny”. Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, p. 57.

rather an ancillary argument, at least for our present concerns. The criticism that Niebuhr champions a muscular Christianity, aligned with his defence of American democracy, rather misses the point that Niebuhr is trying to make in that defence; namely that a liberal democracy is one way of offering the necessary framework for understanding the meaning of history, *not* that God is immanently operative in history only through such a political programme.

Niebuhr thus defends liberal democracy, I think, because he believes that it is through the democratic principles of liberty and equality that we understand that the transcendent God becomes immanent in human history; and, as we have seen, because of God's immanence we have a foundation for our hopes. But democracy only helps understand the foundation of hope if those who support the idea do so with humility: "Democracy therefore requires something more than a religious devotion to moral ideals. It requires religious humility...[which] springs only from the depth of a religion which confronts the individual with a more ultimate majesty and purity than all human majesties and values...".<sup>105</sup> Moreover, democracy only gives voice to an appropriately construed eschatology, but is not itself an adequate eschatology. That is, to Niebuhr, democratic ideology avoids (at least, ideally) the problem of becoming the "master" of its own destiny, and is thus better suited to understand the function of a proper eschatology.

This does not mean that Niebuhr offers blind endorsements of American democracy as an instrument for God's rule in history. In fact, he argues "against the idea that America, in contrast to communist tyrannies, offer[s] a favorable climate for Christianity".<sup>106</sup> What he does endorse, though, is a political programme which gives way to a "prophetic eschatology...the theological concept by which [he maintains] the tension between two themes, neither of which he would surrender: the requirements of political activity and the demands of Christian love".<sup>107</sup> In other words, democracy provides a theoretical framework by which eschatology is

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<sup>104</sup> Cf. Andrew J. Bacevich, "Prophets and Poseurs", *World Affairs*, Vol. 170, No. 3 (Winter 2008): 24-26.

<sup>105</sup> Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, p. 104. For an intriguing account of the humility in Niebuhr's incidental writings, see Dennis E. Lambert, "Discerning a Christian Realism for Today, with Special Reference to the Attitudes of Humility in Niebuhr's Incidental Writing, 1941-1952, Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2004.

<sup>106</sup> Roger Shinn, "Realism, Radicalism, and Eschatology in Reinhold Niebuhr: A Reassessment": 420.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*: 421.

understood to fill the hollowness of utopian eschatologies like Marxism and liberalism. It does this by proffering an understanding of God as immanent in history. But this is not an eschatology for Christians only; it likewise informs how we understand “secularity”, if by that term we mean that “space” where God-in-Christ has acted, still acts, and will act. As O’Donovan notes about Israel’s understanding of hope and what can be understood from this interpretation today:

Refusing, on the one hand, to give up what it knew of God, itself, and the world, accepting, on the other, that what it knew was incomplete and demanded validation, Israel understood itself and its knowledge and love of God as a contradiction to be endured *in hope*. ‘Secularity’ is irreducibly an eschatological notion; it requires an eschatological faith to sustain it, a belief in a disclosure that is ‘not yet’ but is absolutely presupposed as the inner meaning of what we know already. If we allow the ‘not yet’ to slide toward ‘never,’ we say something entirely different and wholly incompatible, for the virtue that undergirds all secular politics is an expectant patience. What follows from the rejection of belief is an intolerable tension between the need for meaning in society and the only partial capacity of society to satisfy the need.<sup>108</sup>

O’Donovan’s is a restatement of realised eschatology that Niebuhr can appreciate. That is, it is the middle ground where the “inner meaning” is known already that we have our impetus for moral action and our basis for hope, but it is also this area which Marxism and liberalism pass over on their respective journeys to utopia. O’Donovan thus indirectly captures Niebuhr’s criticism of Marxism and liberalism on the issue of eschatology. This middle ground, what Niebuhr recognises as a “*terra incognita*”,<sup>109</sup> is the area where Christ is immanent in the Christian realist interpretation of history. It is also the place where Christ redeems history. Let us discuss this briefly before bringing this chapter to a close.

#### 7.10. Redemption

Part of Niebuhr’s problem with utopian dreams, be they soft or hard, Marxist or liberal, is that their chief utopian end is a particular kind of redemption of history. Redemption for the utopians is, according to Niebuhr, the idea “...that human history ultimately answers all its unsolved problems and overcomes all its earlier insecurities, that history is itself a kind of process of redemption, has gained such a

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<sup>108</sup> O’Donovan, *Common Objects of Love*, p. 42. Italics mine.

<sup>109</sup> Niebuhr, *Irony of American History*, p. 65.

strong hold upon modern man because it is actually partly true and because all the tremendous advance of science, technology, and intelligence seemed to justify the belief".<sup>110</sup> But the problem with this redemption is that it is self-referentially incoherent. That is, when the human is the creature and creator of human existence, as Niebuhr claimed about the utopian, whatever redemption that utopian considers necessary is, in reality, not, because redemption only occurs between those who are at odds with one another; i.e., God and humans. The individual is not a divided entity unto himself or herself. In other words, as Niebuhr says, "...[t]here can be nothing purely intrinsic in life [like the "individual"]", since all things are related to each other. What seems intrinsic is that aspect of existence which does not wait upon some future development for its meaning, but has that meaning, not within itself, but within itself in relation to...the ultimate source of the meaning of our life".<sup>111</sup>

The realised eschatology adopted by the utopians does not resolve the problem because it leaves an empty space, a "badlands" where redemption in history does not occur because it looks instead to a future-oriented redemption which offers, Niebuhr thinks, no basis for hope in this present existence. Redemption for Niebuhr, then, comes only in the person of Christ who is immanently present in human existence.

Niebuhr is not often associated with the perspective that God is redeeming history presently through Christ, a fact Niebuhr's contemporaries were quick to point out as a deficiency in his theology, and a mantle of criticism contemporary commentators have carried willingly.<sup>112</sup> Nevertheless, the present redemption of history in Christ is an idea already present in others' enunciations of Christian realism prior to Niebuhr's reception and articulation of it, and it is an idea that

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<sup>110</sup> Niebuhr, *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics*, p. 19.

<sup>111</sup> Niebuhr, *Discerning the Signs of the Times*, p. 87.

<sup>112</sup> Halliwell notes that even H. Richard Niebuhr is critical of Reinhold on this point. "Indeed, in a 1933 letter to his brother, Richard outlined six crucial points that he believes separates his and Reinhold's temperaments". Chief on the list was the claim "that Reinhold's God transcends history, whereas for Richard, God is embedded in time, acting in a creative and *redemptive* way through Christ". Halliwell, *The Constant Dialogue*, p. 121. See also H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Only Way into the Kingdom of God", *Christian Century*, 6 (1932) in which Richard makes this same point. Cited in Halliwell, p. 121 n. 90. See also Rachel Hadley King, *The Omission of the Holy Spirit from Reinhold Niebuhr's Theology*, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1964), pp. 79-121. Contemporary criticisms of the same theme are best represented by Hauerwas's *With the Grain of the Universe*.



Niebuhr does not dismiss.<sup>113</sup> This is not to say that Niebuhr posits an evangelical personalism; he does not. But God's activity in history is not excluded from Niebuhr's understanding of redemption. It is, moreover, precisely because God does work in history that the realist has any foundation for hope.

### 7.11. Repentance

In the final chapter of *Reflections on the End of an Era*, Niebuhr offers what I think is one of his more significant contributions to the notion that God's transcendence over and, immanence in, history provides a basis for hope in our moral actions because it anticipates many of his theological insights in his later works.<sup>114</sup> Niebuhr concludes the penultimate chapter of that work with the statement that "[t]here is no place in either radical or liberal utopianism for the 'experience of grace'. The [false] hope of realizing perfection in history has made such an experience unnecessary".<sup>115</sup>

The "place" where grace is experienced is, as noted above, in human contexts. After detailing the various problems he finds with liberalism and modernity, Niebuhr gives an account the ethical import of Christianity for social ethics if the grace of God in history is to be taken as fact. He defines grace realistically; that is, as "the apprehension of the absolute from the perspective of the relative".<sup>116</sup> In other words, the grace of God stands apart from our conceptions of it, but it is nevertheless immanently present among us.

The rest of the chapter is spent analysing how grace is understood as present in both Christian orthodoxy to Christian liberalism, and Niebuhr is never clear on which side he comes down. At times he speaks as though he is representative of the liberalism against which he argues in the majority of his work with statements like "[i]t is significant that in the Christian religion, Jesus, who in his own life incarnated the spirit of pure love to a unique and remarkable degree, became for Paul the symbol and revelation of a divine forgiveness which knew how to accept human

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<sup>113</sup> E.g., John Bennett notes both that "God is the Lord of History" and that "God is the redeemer" of that history. God's activity in history is exhibited by the fact that humans assume certain responsibilities by which they are trying to find accordance with "God's will", while, on the other hand, God's redemption of history is demonstrated by God's forgiveness for human irresponsibility. See Bennett, *Christian Realism*, pp. 46-62.

<sup>114</sup> Niebuhr, "The Assurance of Grace" in *Reflections on the End of an Era*, pp. 279-296.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 274-275.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, p. 281.

intentions for achievements".<sup>117</sup> Elsewhere, though, he writes as if from a position of Christian Orthodoxy: "The fact that Christian orthodoxy relates and fastens the experience of grace...to the one fact of the incarnation need not lead to a magical and unmoral interpretation of grace".<sup>118</sup> Despite the fact that Niebuhr never comes down too forcefully on one side or the other,<sup>119</sup> his concluding statements from that chapter are significant. There Niebuhr writes that

[i]n classical Christianity it is suggested again and again that repentance is the beginning of redemption, even that it is synonymous with redemption. This is a profound insight; for the evils and frustrations of life and history would be, in fact, unbearable if contrition did not reduce the presumptions and pretensions of the self....Classical religious faith is always saved from despair because it knows that sin is discovered by the very faith through which men catch a glimpse of the reality of spirit....The knowledge of the depths within the self saves from pride, prevents a bitter criticism of the sins of others and makes a sullen rebellion against the imperfections of nature and history impossible; the knowledge of the heights keeps profound self-knowledge from degenerating into bitter disillusionment.<sup>120</sup>

Put differently, repentance occurs when humans (realistically) apprehend God's existence through faith and acknowledge their status as sinners; repentance begets redemption; redemption keeps us from despair.

This theme is decidedly more developed in Niebuhr's mature theology, in which he locates the idea of redemptive hope in the person of Christ, and, more specifically, in the properly ordered love of Christ through our neighbours, which is what it means to say that Christ is present in history in the first place.<sup>121</sup> We see this with Niebuhr's statement that "[t]he Christian church is a community of hopeful believers...which does not fear the final judgement, not because it is composed of sinless saints but because it is a community of forgiven sinners...".<sup>122</sup> Once this

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<sup>117</sup> *Ibid*, p. 279. For a helpful essay on this tendency of Niebuhr's, see Henry Nelson Wieman, "A Religious Naturalist Looks at Reinhold Niebuhr" in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, especially pp. 339-344.

<sup>118</sup> Niebuhr, *Reflections on the End of an Era*, p. 281.

<sup>119</sup> Though he does write that liberalism and orthodoxy have failed to account for the place of ethical tension where grace is experience. *Ibid*, p. 292.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid*, p. 295.

<sup>121</sup> Recall chapter five's discussion on the significance of the existential theme of "life with life" in Niebuhr's realism. Niebuhr's mature theology is rarely considered by his critics, which may account for the lack of serious attention given to the idea of hope in Christ.

<sup>122</sup> Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, p. 270.

forgiveness is acknowledged, repentance commences and hope is instilled: "The human situation is [thus] not...hopeless; for wherever men recognize the reality and the power of self-love...the power of self-love may be broken. In so far as it persists men live in the hope and faith that God will overcome what they cannot overcome".<sup>123</sup> That is, humans live with the knowledge apprehended by faith that "it is Christ himself who becomes the judge at the final judgment of the world" and that his final judgment is also merciful.<sup>124</sup>

But the reality of this hope is that it is unrealisable without the Christ of history, who stands as the *Eschatos* of history, as defined above. More to the point, the *agape* of Christ, exhibited on the cross, is the norm of life and the basis of this hope. It is thus Christ, "whose sacrificial love seeks conformity with, and finds justification in, the divine and eternal *agape*, the ultimate and final harmony of life with life".<sup>125</sup> But "the eternal and divine [are not in] absolute contradiction to the temporal and historical. There are, therefore validations of *agape* in actual history, in so far as concern for the other elicits a reciprocal response".<sup>126</sup> In other words, God's transcendence does not supplant God's immanence in history. In fact, the two are concomitants of one another, demonstrated any time the sacrificial love of Christ is reciprocally shared by those who exist as God's creatures, not as the creators. Any time, that is, "where two or three are gathered" in the name of Christ is Christ "there among them" (Matt. 18:20).

#### 7.8. Conclusions

Eschatology, particularly an eschatology which does not elide hope in existential contexts, means several things for Niebuhr's realism. First, it is an understanding not of the "last things", but of the "last one", the Christ of history, the *Eschatos*. This emphasis Niebuhr shares with Barthian dialecticism (though there is very little else the two have in common). The recognition of Christ as the last One takes Niebuhrian realism in the direction of what I earlier called ontological eschatology. This is the concept of the future being brought into the present in the Christ of faith and the Christ of history. It is, in fact, Christ who provides the "eschatological unity" that allows the realist to understand how the future is brought

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<sup>123</sup> *Ibid*, p. 225.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid*, p. 262.

<sup>125</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. II, p. 81.

to bear on the present. We noted that in ontological eschatology, the most important feature is a proper orientation of love toward others, which ultimately means that our love is oriented to Christ. Despite the fact that Niebuhr overworryes the “idealness” of Augustine’s love ethic, he nevertheless still appropriates it for his understanding of eschatology.

Moving forward from the discussion of ontological eschatology, we noted how utopian liberals and Marxists provide helpful conversation partners for understanding Niebuhr’s eschatology. As discussed, Niebuhr does not think that eschatology can be “realised” in the sense that history is in an interim, or that we have experienced the “already” and are awaiting the “not yet”. Instead, eschatology is as relevant for present contexts as it is for any future we might anticipate. It is, in this sense, an incarnate eschatology.

The discussion of utopians led to our discussion of redemption in Christian realism. Niebuhr thinks of repentance as one and the same with redemption. Once the human affirms God’s grace-as-forgiveness which is the basis of redemption, he or she begins to repent. Repentance involves properly ordering one’s loves so that our love is oriented to Christ, through the love of the other. Loving Christ through the loving of another is what it means to say that Christ is present in history in the first place.

The Christian realism developed by Niebuhr during the tumultuous decades of the twentieth century offered stark analyses of the problems of human life. It also faithfully continued to deliver the promise that though we do not know God fully, we are fully known by God. Niebuhr’s realism, that is, “afflicted the comforted and comforted the afflicted”. More importantly, though, it offered a framework by which theological hope can be understood to mean that Christ stands transcendentally with God, and immanently with us in history; that is, that Christ is “all in all” (Eph. 1:23).

Some concluding remarks in the next chapter will now bring this thesis to a close.

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<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, p. 96.



## Chapter 8

### CONCLUSIONS

#### 8.1. *Synopsis*

I have argued in this thesis that Reinhold Niebuhr's interpretation of Christian realism provides a framework for theological hope. The world Niebuhr inhabited is not the one we inhabit today; his realities are not our own. But that fact is not reason enough alone to leave the volumes of his thought unopened in our libraries. The mineshaft may have changed, but we are still canaries searching for daylight. This is one of the reasons this thesis focuses at first on the foundational elements of Niebuhr's realism. Circumstances and social realities change, as do the ways in which we interpret foundations. There are realities which transcend our own existences, and the problems of sin and misjudgement are perennially and ineradicably a part of human existence. But the knowledge of these facts is indispensable to the disposition it creates.

This is why chapters two and three focused on framing the groundwork for understanding the foundational concerns of Niebuhr's realism and the ways in which those concerns are highlighted against the backdrop of post-Vatican II moral theological developments. Chapter four demonstrated how the foundational issues are important for inculcating particular dispositions with regard to the ways in which a realistic social hermeneutic is developed, which in turn led to the reconsideration of Milbank's criticisms of Niebuhr's realism because Milbank criticises Niebuhr precisely on these foundational and hermeneutical elements. Milbank's presentation of Niebuhr's realism is ultimately the presentation of a hopeless realism because Milbank is convinced that the foundations of Niebuhr's thought are different than the ones presented in the earlier chapters, and that they adhere to a liberal narrative which knows nothing of a true Christian ethic. It was Milbank's criticisms that inspired the consideration of hope in Christian realism in the first place.

Just as the reality which transcends existence is timeless, so is the need for hope in human existence. It is true that the world Niebuhr inhabited in the mid-twentieth century is not our world, but it is equally the case that there are realities of our world ("wars and rumours of war") that underscore the basic human need of hope. The Christian realist cannot tell people *what* to hope for; human contexts are

too variable and varying for that, and telling someone else what to hope for is potentially symptomatic of the selfish pride Niebuhr castigates. But the Christian realist can offer an analysis of *how* to hope as well as a word about the one *in whom* to hope. This was the point of chapters six and seven. Christian life is ultimately about discerning how to live caught in the sometimes intolerable tension of despair over the problems of existence and the hope that is promised to us in the gospel of Christ. In sum, Christian life is lived at the crossroads of essential life and human existence. Chapter six focused on the essential hopes that are placed in the transcendent Christ. Chapter seven then focused on the counterpoint to the previous chapter's arguments; namely, that theological hope is also to be understood existentially with the Christ who is immanent among us. This discussion was tied to Niebuhr's interpretation of eschatology as relevant both in the present and the future, an appropriate way to bring the thesis to a close.

### 8.2. *The Situation Today*

As mentioned in the introduction, Christian realism, particularly as understood by Niebuhr, has been experiencing something of a renaissance over the past several years. Most of the work written during that time has been (helpfully) concerned to demonstrate the ways in which Niebuhr's realism impacts on today's political contexts. This focus on the political does not mean, however, that hope cannot be considered right alongside the political debates surrounding Niebuhr's realism. In fact, I think it of chief importance that we give an account of hope as a part of our understanding of Christian realism today. There are at least three reasons for that.

First, an account of theological hope keeps Christian realism *realistic*. This is especially so in the negative sense. That is, a hopeful realistic ethic keeps our moral ambitions in check and prevents us from exchanging utopian or sentimental hopes for a more realistic ethic which lives in the tension between sin and grace. Thus hope, realistically understood, reminds us of what not to hope for, which consequently avoids the problems Niebuhr found in the progressive liberalism of those like Rauschenbusch. In other words, realistic hope acknowledges that though we can strive for justice in our social contexts, we will always only achieve modicums of that justice.

The second reason that hope is important for better understanding Christian realism today is paradoxically related to the first. Theological hope keeps Christian realism's ethics *ethical*. That is, if we know that we are always only going to achieve modicums of justice we are, in a sense, more free to act for justice. For example, if I know that I might fail in efforts to bring about community awareness concerning the need for racial reconciliation, I am consequently freer to make whatever changes can possibly be implement, even if they fall far short of the goals with which I first set out. This freedom is rooted in the realistic hope that says that ultimately it is God-in-Christ who gives our lives meaning (which is how we know what racial injustice is in the first place) and who ultimately overcomes that which we cannot. Hope, realistically understood, is thus a basis for our moral acts.

Third, theological hope keeps Christian realism *Christian*. If we declare that our hope is in God-in-Christ who overcomes our finite and sinful existence, we make a theologically hopeful claim that the transcendent Christ is the one in whom injustice ceases to exist. This is a universalising claim that Christ will be "all in all" for all people at all times. Furthermore, the hopeful realist, as we saw in chapter seven, likewise claims that Christ is already immanent among us, particularly where our loves are properly oriented and where there is no lack of justice.

These three understandings of hope—that it is realistic, ethical and Christian—are of the reasons that discussions of Christian realism today needs to give an account of the theological hope that evolves from the frameworks of realistic thought.

### 8.3. *Looking Forward*

If, as I think is likely, there continues to be an interest in Christian realism generally, and Reinhold Niebuhr's interpretation of it specifically, new avenues of research and enquiry will continue to open. Given the evolving nature of the globalised world, this is particularly true. With regard to the issues of theological hope and Christian realism, at least one particular avenue of research should be considered. This is what Charles Matthews calls "hopeful citizenship".<sup>1</sup>

As was noted in chapter seven, Matthews is critical of Niebuhr for lacking a properly theological account of hope, treating it instead as an anaesthetic to the

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Matthews, *A Theology of Public Life*, pp. 214-260.

problems of evil and human sinfulness. I do not agree with that assessment of Niebuhr, but as chapter seven indicated, I do think the framework for what was referred to as ontological eschatology finds much in common between Niebuhr and Matthewes. Similarly, Matthewes's outline of hopeful citizenship provides a helpful starting point for relating to a hopeful Christian realism. Matthewes suggests three things that are important for hopeful citizenship. First, hopeful citizenship begins with a critique of "intellectuals' general failure to offer a credible 'post-utopian' hopefulness, and identifies the root problem as their failure to present a picture of evil...that can comprehend the profundity and complexity of the challenges that subvert all utopias".<sup>2</sup> Second, the basis of such a criticism builds on Augustinian appraisals of charity. Third, hopeful citizenship encourages "citizens' participation in their polity's public life and to the churches' formation of their members as eschatologically minded pilgrims during the world".<sup>3</sup>

All three of Matthewes's suggestions resemble some part of the enquiries that have been carried out in this thesis. First, Niebuhr offers criticisms of utopianism and a response to the problem of privative evil (chapter five) that fits Matthewes's above suggestion. Second, one of the features in chapter three that was highlighted against the backdrop of post-Vatican II natural law was the issue of charity which, for Niebuhr, provides a "possible ideal" for moral action. Third, as chapter seven discussed, eschatology, properly understood, provides a way of interpreting hope both in the present and the future.

Because the areas that Matthewes suggests as a basis for hopeful citizenship are so much aligned with much of the work that has already been completed in this thesis on hope and Niebuhr's realism, it seems a natural and logical step to consider how the two agree and disagree in the development of such citizenship.

Putting the theoretical discussions of hope from this thesis into conversation with the practical concerns of citizenship would open up new avenues in which the current work on Niebuhr's political ethics could be considered in light of the theological themes of Christian realism. Moreover, it would keep the important theological concerns of realism to the fore, which will prove important if Christian realism is going to continue to be a valuable exchange of ideas.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 218.



#### 8.4. *Final Words*

Niebuhr's interpretation of Christian realism will continue to be important for the conversations about how best to interpret our fractious and fractured lives. Understanding the foundations on which Christian realism is built is crucial if that interpretation is to make sense, and if we want to understand what light realism has to shine down the mineshaft. Long after the places smooth where Niebuhr's name was once etched, this central fact will remain: Christ, who exists "before all time, and now and forever" (Jude 24), is the one in whom all hopes—possible or impossible; now, or in the future—are placed. While the etching is still visible, though, it seems appropriate to give Niebuhr the last word:

Thus, wisdom about our destiny is dependent upon a humble recognition of the limits of our knowledge and our power. Our most reliable understanding is the fruit of 'grace' in which faith completes our ignorance without pretending to possess its certainties as knowledge; and in which contrition mitigates our pride without destroying our hope.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. II, p. 321.

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